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ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF DEGROWTH

This handbook takes stock of 'degrowth', a concept and movement gaining increasing visibility in the 2020s. Contributors explain contexts for degrowth's significance, elaborate its diverse history and detail its unique approaches, practices, challenges and potential futures.

Part I sets the ecological, economic and political contexts framing degrowth's evolution as a significant concept for societies facing the challenges of deepening socio-political inequities and ecological unsustainabilities. Part II identifies themes characterising degrowth movements in a sample of distinctive countries, starting with its origins in France. Part III shows degrowth 'concepts in action', explaining in practical ways the meanings of terms such as 'conviviality', 'degrowth doughnut', 'frugal abundance', 'commoning' and 'defashioning'. Part IV offers analyses and forward-looking imaginaries for degrowth from the perspectives of distinctive agents, agendas and theoretical frameworks. Contributors engage with topics such as ecofeminist futures, utopian thought and show how degrowth is necessary to address poverty.

Highly experienced and knowledgeable contributors from varied scholarly and practitioner fields address a range of strategic, activist, policy and research questions in this handbook. Grounded in empirical cases, they identify significant social and ecological challenges, relevant to students, researchers, activists, policymakers and practitioners at various levels within the wide range of fields in which degrowth can be applied.

Anitra Nelson is an activist scholar and Honorary Principal Fellow at the Informal Urbanism Research Hub (InfUr-), University of Melbourne (Australia). Among numerous degrowth publications, she is co-editor of *Housing for Degrowth: Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities* (2018) and *Food for Degrowth: Perspectives and Practices* (2021) collections, and co-author of *Exploring Degrowth: A Critical Guide* (2020). See https://anitranelson.info/

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ACRONYMS, SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS*

* For abbreviations in Figures in Chapter 16, see legends alongside associated figures.

$	dollar
€	euro
£	pound
%	per cent
AbM	Abahlali baseMjondolo
AD	Associazione per la Decrescita (Association for Degrowth)
ADEME	Agency for Environment and Energy Management
AdOC	Association des Objecteurs de Croissance (Association of Objectors to Growth)
AFSA	Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa
AI	artificial intelligence
aka	also known as
AMAPS	Community Supported Agriculture Programmes
APPO	Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca
AROPE	at risk of poverty or social exclusion (EU statistical office)
ATTAC	Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizen Action)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BGCI	Beyond Growth Conference Italy (2024)
BIPOC	black, Indigenous and people of colour
Bn	billion
BTL	Brisbane Tool Library (Queensland, Australia)
CBEs	consumption-based emissions
CBPP	commons-based peer production
CCTV	closed circuit television
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEO	chief executive officer
CESCR	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

CFA	Communauté Financière en Afrique (West Africa) and Coopération Financière en Afrique (Central Africa) (cooperation treaties)
CI	Cittaslow International
CNN	Cable News Network
CO_2	carbon dioxide/emissions
CO_2e	CO_2 equivalent
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSA	community-supported agriculture
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DALYs	disability-adjusted life years
DC	District of Columbia (US)
DEAL	Doughnut Economics Action Lab
DFI	development finance institution
DIT	do it together
DIY	do it yourself
DMC	domestic material consumption
DSNOQ	Decrescita: Se Non Ora Quando? (Degrowth: If Not Now, When?) conference (Venice 2022)
ed.	editor
eds	editors
EIC	editor-in-chief
EJOLT	Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade
ESSR	Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic
et al.	*et alia* (Latin for 'and others')
ETC Group	Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration
EU	European Union
FaDA	Feminism(s) and Degrowth Alliance
FAN	Fashion Act Now
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FCAA	Feminismo Comunitario Antirracista Anticolonial
FE	Foundational Economy
FEC	Foundational Economy Collective
G20	Group of Twenty (countries)
Gas	Solidarity purchase groups (Italy)
GDP	gross domestic product
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GFN	Global Footprint Network
GHG	greenhouse gas
GJM	Global Justice Movement
GMO	genetically modified organism
GN	Global North
GNP	gross national product
Gt	gigatons
GTA	Global Tapestry of Alternatives
GTDF	Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures
ha	hectare/s
hr	hour

HALE	health-adjusted life expectancy
ICCAs	Indigenous Peoples' and Local Community Conserved Areas and Territories
ICL	Israel Chemicals Limited
ICTs	information and communications technologies
ICTA	Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology)
IDN	International Degrowth Network
IG Metall	German Steel Workers Union
ILO	International Labour Organization
InfUr-	Informal Urbanism Research Hub
INDEP	International Network for Democratic Economic Planning
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPE	Institute of Political Ecology
IRP	International Resource Panel
ITEP	Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy,
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWHC	Indigenous Women's Healing Centre
KNOCA	Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies
km	kilometre
kWp	peak kilowatt – maximum power generated from solar panel/system
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other identities beyond binary notions of gender
LoC	Library of Congress
LVC	La Via Campesina
M	million
M5S	Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement)
MAUSS	Mouvement anti-utilitariste en sciences sociales Movimento anti-utilitarista nelle scienze sociali Anti-utilitarian movement in the social sciences
MCD	Maison Commune de la Décroissance
MDF	*Movimento per la Decrescita Felice* (Movement for Happy Degrowth)
MF	material footprint
mn	million
MOC	Mouvement des Objecteurs de Croissance (Movement of Objectors to Growth)
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement in Brazil)
MW	megawatt
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution (re UNFCCC climate plans)
NGO	non-government organisation
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NIMBY	not in my backyard
NVW	Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGM	French acronym for GMO/genetically modified organism

OPCD	Observatoire de la Décroissance et de la Post-Croissance (Observatory of Degrowth and Post-Growth)
PAH	Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform against the Mortgage Crisis in Spain)
PFAS	per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances ('forever chemicals')
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PLAN	Planetary Limits Academic Network
PPLD	Parti Pour La Décroissance (Party for Degrowth)
PV	photo voltaic
QDD	*Quaderni della Decrescita* (Notebooks on degrowth)
QSVY	*Que no quede ni uno solo* (They all must go! Not one should remain!)
R&D	Research & Degrowth
R&Di	Research & Degrowth International
RES	Italian Network of Solidarity Economy
REIS	Italian Network for the Solidarity Economy
Rio+20	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) June 2012)
RN	Rassemblement National Party
RNZ	Radio New Zealand
RWE	Rheinisch-Westfälische Elektrizitätswerk
SAP	structural adjustment plan Social Democratic Party (Sweden)
SDG	sustainable development goal
SJOS	safe and just operating space
SLQ	State Library of Queensland
SOS	save our souls
SPA	Social Provisioning Approach
SUV	sports utility vehicle (four wheel drives)
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications
t	tonnes
tn	trillion
UAA	unconditional autonomy allowance
UAB	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Autonomous University of Barcelona)
UBI	universal basic income
UBS	universal basic services
UCL	University College London
UHC	Universal Health Care
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNAM	National Autonomous University of Mexico
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)

VD	Visit Djúpivogur
WEAll	Wellbeing Economy Alliance
WEIRD	Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic
WHO	World Health Organization
WWI	First World War
WWII	Second World War
WWOOF	willing worker on organic farm/World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms/ World Wide Organisation of Organic Farms
ZAD	*zone à défendre* (activist 'zone to defend'; bureaucratic '*zone d'aménagement différé*')

PART I

The current growth conjuncture

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1
DEGROWTH HAS COME OF AGE

Anitra Nelson and Vincent Liegey

In the 2020s degrowth has come of age. It is visible in the mainstream media and attracts a variety of audiences. For instance, a *Guardian* article by environmental journalist Matthew Taylor (2024) is headed – '"These ideas are incredibly popular": What is degrowth, and can it save the planet?' – and he quotes from degrowth advocate Jason Hickel, whose widely applauded book *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (2021) has been translated into more than 10 other languages. This is a turnabout – degrowth as a movement initially gained ground in Europe (in other languages). With respect to policymaking, a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Climate Change 2022* criticises gross domestic product (GDP) as 'a poor metric of human well-being', arguing that 'climate policy evaluation requires better grounding in relation to decent living standards' (IPCC 2022, pp. 5–105, 17–59). Not only does the IPCC suggest that 'the degrowth movement, with its focus on sustainability over profitability, has the potential to speed up transformations' (IPCC 2022, pp. 5–105, 17–59) but also indicates that 'degrowth pathways may be crucial in combining technical feasibility of mitigation with social development goals' (IPCC 2022, pp. 5–32).

Market economies oriented to production for trade seem outdated, ineffective and inappropriate for a century where key challenges focus attention on satisfying everyone's basic needs and taking account of planetary limits. This is why degrowth, explicitly critiquing and inverting the all-encompassing and ever-eroding drive to growth at all costs, strikes such a chord. Degrowth challenges growth-driven societies whose economies have proved highly damaging to both people and Earth.

Degrowth activists seek, instead, living practices of sufficiency and solidarity – satisfying *everyone's* basic needs – no more, no less – through light ecological footprints. A degrowth transformation focuses on direct democracy as well as livelihoods of 'sufficiency', which the IPCC describes as 'a set of measures and daily practices that avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human well-being for all within planetary boundaries' (IPCC 2022, pp. 1–41). Anti-capitalist and driven from the grassroots, degrowth activists and advocates focus on collective sufficiency, and caring for Earth and people. In contrast to the quantitative focus of big-is-better growth, degrowth is an essentially qualitative concept. It is an invitation to explore new imaginaries liberated from economism and, instead, focus on what really matters around such concepts as 'conviviality' and 'autonomy'.

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Still, degrowth is often misrepresented as a one-dimensional opposite of growth akin to depression, shrinkage or austerity. This is a maligning distortion of 'degrowth' as understood within the movement and by the practitioners and the theoreticians who initiated the term. Degrowth is neither simply an economic term nor is it a synonym for loss. Just as capitalism implies a political philosophy of being and society, so does degrowth. Think *de*commodification, *de*colonisation and *de*militarisation, which all go beyond simply dismantling, stopping or diminishing self-destructive processes. They, and the aligned *de*growth, involve re-creating fundamental and vital relationships, cultures, power dynamics and values eroded and made invisible by growth-driven, market-oriented societies.

Degrowth is also confused with 'post-growth', which Widuto et al. (2023, p. 5) cluster with terms such as 'beyond growth' and 'a-growth'. They point out that post-growth thinking centres on altering the composition of growth to prioritise social and environmental values and aims, as in well-being and social welfare services; views green or inclusive growth as insubstantial, given current challenges; and deems degrowth unachievable. With respect to degrowth the not-so-far post-growth position has similarities to that of the UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer who, early in October 2024, declared 'I will not sacrifice Great British industry to the drum-banging, finger-wagging Net Zero extremists' (Spratt 2024).

Movements, disruptions and transitions demand novel concepts and innovative practices. Degrowth is about enduring and novel concepts – 'frugal abundance', sharing, commoning, 'open (re)localisation' of economies and cultures alike, conviviality, including 'convivial technology', and much more. So much more that this *Routledge Handbook of Degrowth* can simply offer a strong sense of certain degrowth approaches and issues, and send you in various degrowth directions. With its holistic and radical approach to system change, degrowth is being explored by ever more disciplines, fields of study, and like-movements. Internally, the movement is maturing, with open and well-reasoned debates and discourses on topics as diverse as organisational strategies for direct and local provisioning of basic needs, such as food and housing; implementing substantive democratic processes (horizontalism and autonomy); the decolonisation of capitalist Global North–South relations; and embedding social and environmental justice.

Academic literature on degrowth has increasingly flourished over the past 15 years alongside the broadening support for degrowth ideas and principles within populations and throughout academic fields dealing with environmental challenges. Diverse surveys show such dynamics. King et al. (2023) found in a global survey that 73 per cent of climate policy researchers took an agrowth (growth agnostic) and/or degrowth position. Meanwhile, 60.5 per cent of people surveyed across 34 European countries favoured a post-growth, inclusive of degrowth, position (Paulson and Büchs 2022).

The *Routledge Handbook of Degrowth* appears in the Routledge Environment and Sustainability Handbooks Series to highlight insightful analyses of degrowth theory and practice, degrowth's challenges and achievements. Even when dealing with a specific topic or issue, degrowth is most usefully approached in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways. Here, 35 chapters take stock of degrowth literatures and debates, reflect the current state of the field, and succinctly present a variety of potential degrowth futures arising within the movement.

Handbook outline

The handbook consists of four parts. Part I on the current growth conjuncture sets the stage for understanding how and why degrowth has evolved as such a significant concept globally for a century characterised by growing socio-political inequities and ecological unsustainabilities. Three

other chapters, alongside this one, constitute Part I – outlining key dimensions of such inequities and unsustainabilities in ecological, economic and political spheres. Representing a broad set of diagnostics, they analyse key aspects of the precarious states of humanity, nature and politics that contextualise the rise of the degrowth movement.

Even though the idea and initial theories of degrowth developed decades earlier, only in this century did degrowth emerge as a visibly active movement in France and then spread through Europe. As such, the nine chapters that comprise Part II on degrowth origins and steppingstones, start with one that consolidates the backstory of degrowth centring on France. Then, a series of select chapters create, as it were, stepping stones to underscore themes characterising degrowth theories, philosophies and activist movements in a sample of different countries, discrete cultural and political contexts, languages and regions.

This approach promises to add significantly to a degrowth literature somewhat marred by insufficient English translations and reviews of major degrowth work in non-English languages. This characteristic alone distinguishes this handbook from other degrowth collections. The sentiment of degrowth is grounded in alter-globalisation – envisaging a world of global cooperation and interaction, at the same time as promoting the localisation of economies and regenerative place-based ecologies and politics. As such, an open form of bioregionalism will remain characteristic of degrowth futures along with expressing practices embedded in the emergent concept of pluriversalism.

Chapters in Part III 'Degrowth practices: concepts in action' show how degrowth activists and practitioners apply specific degrowth values, principles and philosophical approaches to demonstrate their unique contributions. This part offers 10 chapters explaining degrowth's unique contributions and characteristics. Each focuses on a key term from the degrowth lexicon, such as 'autonomy' and 'sufficiency', or a distinctive degrowth approach to sectors such as work, fashion and health.

Part IV 'Degrowth futures: perspectives and strategies' offers a selection of forward-looking imaginaries for the degrowth project from the points of view of distinctive agents, agendas and theoretical frameworks. This part serves to highlight some key areas of critical contention, disturbing challenges, and constructive advances promised by degrowth thought and activities. These 12 chapters delve into and weave through various themes such as gender, international politicking and utopian thought.

All these chapters will be useful to background policymakers as to degrowth principles and approaches; to inspire activists by placing their struggle in broader contexts, and by raising new questions and analyses for debate; and to provoke researchers to speculate on the challenges of and futures for degrowth. They will enable stronger comparisons and contrasts to be made between degrowth and other sustainability frameworks and postcapitalist futures. All the chapters offer material in an appropriate and compatible form for courses, workshops, students and reading groups.

Handbook chapters

I. Current growth conjuncture

Chapter 2 is one of three on different aspects of the current conjuncture within which degrowth arose as a response. Here Éric Pineault analyses the capitalised ecologies of fossil fuel social metabolisms. He outlines 'growth' in material and ecological terms of tons of matter extracted and dissipated by economic processes, degrading landscapes once rich with ecosystem biodiversity. In

the past century, capitalist extractivism of materials and urbanisation have both grown exponentially along with planetary dissipation and waste. Social ecology reveals the impact on nature of human overproduction and overconsumption as structural facets of capitalist economies – the very soil in which degrowth has taken root.

In Chapter 3 Timothée Parrique abstracts four 'stylised facts' to show how economic growth generates global inequities. First, economic growth advantages the already rich and Global North more than it benefits the poor and Global South. Consequently, second, the prospects for status and material security of the most disadvantaged, from individuals to nations, are stymied by growth. Meanwhile, third, the powerful rich responsible for expanding and intensifying capitalism disproportionately cause ecological breakdown. Fourth, the resulting ecological damage mainly impacts the poor in the Global South. Such dynamics of growth economies display the critical socio-economic needs for degrowth.

Marina Sitrin, in Chapter 4, describes characteristics of the 21st-century politico-cultural milieu within which major political currents organise today, and within which degrowth emerged as a 'movement within movements'. In contrast to mainstream party and policy-oriented politics, such movements feature aspects most fully developed in consolidated uprisings such as those of the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Mexico, 1994–) and in the Rojava revolution (2013–). These characteristics are also apparent more generally in solidarity and mutual aid networks that re-emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. All build on horizontalist self-organisation, centring autonomy in face-to-face democratic relationships grounded in 'affective alternatives' and prefigurative practices.

II. Degrowth origins and steppingstones

Leading nine chapters on the development of degrowth within specific landscapes and cultures is Chapter 5 by François Jarrige and Vincent Liegey on France. Here, *décroissance* emerged early in debates on Western industrialisation and its impacts, and in the last half-century along with political ecology. Although the rise of degrowth as a slogan and movement is recent, its origins, influences, pioneers, pillars, and debates were already strong in the 1970s. After a long hiatus in the 1980s and 1990s, the term *décroissance* spectacularly spread from 2002, and entered the political and activist arena, designating a sub-group of political ecologists committed to criticising economic development as the dominant ideology. Even if physical limits to growth and debates around possibilities of decoupling have occupied degrowth discourses, 'degrowth *à la française*' always articulated the cultural and anthropological dimensions of sustainable and convivial degrowth.

In Chapter 6, Karl Krähmer, Margherita Forgione, Michel Cardito and Mauro Bonaiuti – founders of key degrowth associations and activist scholars – sketch the development of the Italian *decrescita* movement. It is distinctive due to its early French-influenced start, its entrance into mainstream political debate distorted by a populist Five Star Movement, and its cleaved evolution as a social movement and academic debate. Contrasting political analyses and voluntary simplicity approaches distanced the two main associations theoretically and practically until collaborations in the 2020s. More diverse localised networks have been influenced by militant occupations of deferred development zones, solidarity economy networks, climate justice activism and feminism.

In Germany '*postwachstum*' had unique roots and developed particular currents. This history, since the 1960s, is traced by Matthias Schmelzer and Barbara Muraca (Chapter 7), who classify the most relevant streams in the German-speaking degrowth and post-growth debates. They identify a heterogeneity of positions – solidarity economy influences; tensions with more traditional political organisations, such as trade unions and parties; and an emphasis on macroeconomic policies

for non-growing economies. In contrast to Southern European countries and Anglo traditions, the main influences are from certain French *décroissance* texts, feminist debates, ecological economics, the *altermondialista* current and theories of money and interest.

In Chapter 8, Borja Nogué Algueró and Giacomo D'Alisa describe how the territory in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula nourished degrowth activism and research. The metaphor of an olive tree with two main roots – activism and scholarship – encapsulates the evolution of a particular 'Catalan way' towards degrowth centred on the Research & Degrowth, and later Research & Degrowth International, collectives. The trunk of the tree draws on ecosocialist, communist and anarchist influences, its branches reaching out in the directions of ecological economics, environmental justice, unequal exchange and 'real-existing' degrowth.

Slavomíra Ferenčuhová, Eva Fraňková, Tomáš Hoření Samec and Jan Malý Blažek analyse, in Chapter 9, Czech republic examples as a proxy for a situation characteristic elsewhere, especially in post-socialist European states more generally, where the existence of 'everyday degrowth' and 'quiet degrowth' (or 'real-existing degrowth') is significant. They identify and describe a fault-line between theories guiding an intentional movement for degrowth (degrowth by design) and unintentional, (co)incidental, degrowth practices, which they refer to as 'accidental degrowth'. They explain how the concept of *degrowth by accident* captures a range of degrowth attachments and transformative practices, and argue for more affective-oriented research processes to reveal politico-social attraction and fears associated with degrowth-aligned initiatives and action.

In a somewhat similar fashion, in Chapter 10, Marula Tsagkari, Chris Vrettos and Agisilaos Koulouris explore the uneven landscape of 'real-existing degrowth' practices in Greece, and the roles of degrowth within grassroots environmental and social movements for mutual aid and climate justice. From urban actions in Athens to isolated island communities (Tilos, Ikaria and Gavdos), their studies of cooperatives and solidarity show alternative degrowth pathways, flourishing out of and challenged by economic and environmental crises. The resilient and sustainable 'nowtopias' of democratising energy communities express conviviality, autonomy and renewable energy production. Their analyses underscore the complexities in pursuing degrowth.

The domination of reductionist meanings associated with the English translation 'degrowth', as is prominent in ecological economics, in the topic of Chapter 11 by Nick Fitzpatrick. He argues that the definition of degrowth as the downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints, planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing well-being, is devoid of the rich cultural and grassroots political autonomy themes that occupy many degrowth activists, practitioners and advocates. Through an updated systematic mapping of degrowth literature, Fitzpatrick traces how its new expression became dominant in English-speaking discourses to speculate on the impact on its future direction contra degrowth's revolutionary origins and potential.

Chapter 12 analyses forms of capitalist resistance by Indigenous peoples who draw on rich pre-Colombian heritages to forge ecologically and socially sustainable futures. David Barkin shows how their holistic and deeply ecological worldviews and adaptable traditional practices contribute to their survival in Latin America. Thus, they indicate visions and transitional strategies for degrowth futures. Their success is considerably attributable to the autonomy and holism of their communal organisations and everyday practices, their adaptable traditional beliefs informing interpersonal, communal and ecological relations for an effective degrowth postcapitalism.

Roland Ngam delves into the African continent's capitalist era history to show its world system function in developing the Global North through its own underdevelopment in Chapter 13. Global North wealth was built on African labour (slaves) and exploitation of Africa's resources,

from charter company structures instrumental in creating entire nations to current transnational financial arrangements. As capitalism regenerates where it has accumulated, any just restitution requires substantial wealth transfers to the Global South. Given the global polycrisis and a target to cap global warming at 1.5°C above preindustrial levels, the degrowth movement must engage in instituting ecological reparations, debt moratoriums, fairer trade relations and climate justice, and deliver a pluriversity of degrowth post-capitalisms.

III. Practicing degrowth: concepts in action

The 10 chapters that comprise Part III elaborate on the ways that degrowth principles are practised. They focus on a range of novel *concepts* such as conviviality, frugal abundance and defashioning; degrowth's holistic *approaches* to areas such as work, health and education; and exemplars of various degrowth *models* such as holistic caring economy, the degrowth doughnut model and commoning as the most appropriate organisational form for degrowth.

Conviviality and commoning are essential degrowth concepts that Andrea Vetter and Matthias Fersterer explain in reference to practical prefigurative politics of creating 'nowtopias', in Chapter 14. The commons manifests as a series of entangled relationships with Earth, characterised by relationships of solidarity, mutual support and conviviality – not only convivial sociality but also convivial technologies. They analyse these terms and relationships with respect to rituals, 'relationised property', provisioning and the poetry of Ursula Le Guin – 'We were the words you had no language for'.

Clive L. Spash raises questions and challenges associated with 'autonomy' and 'freedom' in Chapter 15. The concept and practice of autonomy has become a central pillar of the degrowth movement's political and philosophical approaches to individual and collective action, including human relations with Earth. Degrowth requires reducing production and consumption in socially just ways through a democratic transformation to ecologically sustainable futures, and degrowth advocates reject capitalist accumulation and consumerism, as well as other forms of oppression. But, what place 'freedom'? How can degrowth activists usefully discuss and co-create morally 'good' actions and relations in the context of transformation? In short, Spash examines the moral philosophy of autonomy, freedom and degrowth activism in our current stage of social-ecological transformation.

Mladen Domazet explains the rationale and principles for developing a degrowth doughnut model in Chapter 16. Degrowth-oriented modifications of the doughnut economic concept, image and models reflect the needs-oriented foci, deeper democratic principles and counter-hegemonic visions that express degrowth values of justice and sustainability. This conceptual and practical tool guides upper and lower socio-ecological limits for planning degrowth strategies in ecological and social areas to achieve moderation in production and ensure socio-material provisioning for all. Beyond theorising, Domazet provides practical examples of applying degrowth doughnut methods in four contrasting cases – Bolivia and Bangladesh (both Global South) and Germany and Hungary in European core and periphery, respectively.

At first sight 'frugal abundance' seems like a curious term. In Chapter 17 Adrien Plomteux usefully identifies and analyses characteristics of frugal abundance as well as the type of contexts within which such practices tend to flourish. He focuses on the small Icelandic community of Djúpivogur which, at least until his research was conducted, was unaware of the degrowth movement or the term 'frugal abundance'. He has drawn on their practices to illustrate to what extent they think and act in frugally abundant ways, especially through their association with the Cittaslow movement. Plomteux collected the material which forms the content of this chapter on the

'meaning in practice' of frugal abundance in Djúpivogur community discussions reflecting their everyday thoughts, beliefs and practices.

In Chapter 18 Sandra Niessen offers a manifesto for defashioning – degrowing the fashion industry – with aims to prioritise Earth and people's 'lifeways'. Fashion Act Now (FAN) activists strategically propose a clothing commons – a revolutionary beyond-sustainability approach addressing the various implications of reducing material and energy currently required in producing and consuming clothing, including associated waste. FAN calls for abolishing the contemporary fashion system, and most significantly, demands a substitute – 'a pluriverse of clothing systems that are fair, local, decolonial and profoundly respectful and nurturing'.

Martin Hensher and Jean-Louis Aillon address degrowth health and healthcare in Chapter 19. They review approaches to challenges and possibilities for health and healthcare in a degrowth future of voluntarily planned degrowth, in contrast to an unambiguously negative scenario in which contraction occurs in involuntary recessionary ways. They consider voluntary, planned, democratic, fair and convivial degrowth from utopian perspectives of degrowth as a desirable end in itself delivering well-being, and from pragmatic perspectives where degrowth is viewed as necessary for the survivability of society despite real costs and sacrifices. Six key action areas are recommended: to stop negative and advance positive actions, transform the culture of healthcare, prepare national health system assessments, plan for recession and collapse, and establish 'institutions of resilience' in advance of a crisis.

In Chapter 20 Lilian Pungas and Jana Gebauer engage with strategies for developing multi-dimensional care economies oriented around sufficiency – namely the foundational economy, universal basic services, unconditional autonomy allowances and maximum acceptable income approaches. Resilient and sustainable caring economies infuse both human and non-human life. They analyse practical experiences of free public services in 20th-century instances of Central and Eastern European top-down provisioning of basic services. They argue that deep critical engagement with the legacy of the Global East, in terms of basic infrastructure design and planning, experiential knowledge and prefigurative practices, can inform and inspire degrowth approaches and enhance decolonial degrowth scholarship.

Assessing the limits and potential of a degrowth pedagogy for degrowth educators is the focus of Luis I. Prádanos in Chapter 21, propelled by a series of questions. What might an ecologically just, low-entropy educational system look like? What learning is appropriate for a transition from the here-and-now of exploitative extractive economies generating waste and inequity to a fair and regenerative society? How might we best learn to address a biologically impoverished planet? With respect to questions around how the popularisation of artificial intelligence technologies challenges degrowth-oriented imaginaries, the useful argument is made that a political ecology of technology would enhance the pedagogy of degrowth.

In Chapter 22, Eeva Houtbeckers explores distinctive ways in which various degrowth currents reimagine the transformation and reorganisation of work in order to live within planetary boundaries. Work is understudied in terms of addressing socio-ecological crises. Existing research advancing discussions and debates about degrowth and work are classified into three streams – degrowth proposals related to waged labour, proposals beyond waged labour, and more generic rethinking around the notion of work. Transformation to degrowth societies requires abandoning unsustainable practices while creating sustainable ones. The aim is to strengthen discussion and associated research and policy agendas on degrowth work.

Four degrowth practitioners – Orsolya Lazányi, Vincent Liegey, François Schneider and Logan Strenchock – reimagine a constructive and collaborative way forward for practitioners, scholars and activists in Chapter 23. They place current tensions between practitioners and academics

within the context of the evolution of the degrowth movement. Analysing their collective experiences in the degrowth collectives Cargonomia (Budapest, Hungary) and Can Decreix (France), they outline their experiences as degrowth practitioners to propose a formal and respectful dialogue with degrowth academics to re-embed the radical epistemological critique of traditional academia that attended degrowth's origins. Recommendations include closer collaborations between degrowth academics and practitioners, practical traineeships, interns and practical courses that are freely accessible.

IV. Degrowth futures: perspectives and strategies

This forward-looking part comprises 12 chapters analysing key questions for degrowth futures. In Chapter 24, the 'father' of degrowth Serge Latouche throws down the gauntlet: 'nothing is less certain than the realisation of the project of an autonomous society of convivial frugality'. To which other authors address more questions, such as the following. Why 'utopian' thinking? Why do the disadvantaged poor need degrowth? How might majority and minority worlds converge? By over-throwing the 'imperial' with a 'solidary' mode of living'? 'Is abolishing gender the way forward? Whither the city? Geopolitically, is a non-aligned agenda most appropriate for a heterogeneous degrowth? How do degrowth and ecosocialism intertwine? Finally, the subject and agent of our future, youth, rhetorically asks whether transformation away from growth is too complex to achieve. No, they retort! Instead, in Chapter 34 Anuna De Wever and Lena Hartog envision degrowth futures characterised by 'radical abundance, diversity, celebration, self-determination and freedom'.

To celebrate the 20th anniversary of degrowth as a visible movement in France, Serge Latouche assesses two decades of its now international achievements in Chapter 24. In the first half of 2002 a special issue of *S!lence* was published and a special UNESCO symposium took place in the Deconstruct Development, Rebuild the World Conference. Later the next year, the Casseurs de Pub Conference was held in Lyon. Rhizome-like degrowth developed interest and support in neighbouring Spain, Italy, Germany, Portugal and Latin America. Meanwhile, its strength in France meant it even surfaced as a point of debate in the 2022 presidential elections. As such Latouche suggests that today it 'remains both a challenge and a gamble' – degrowth 'constitutes an unbearable provocation, even a blasphemy, for the worshippers of progress and development'.

What is the role of 'Utopia' for the degrowth vision and movement? In Chapter 25, Alexandra Köves views utopia as an inspirational imaginary as opposed, for instance, to sterile or suspect blueprints. In terms of a methodological approach arguing for wide-ranging, ecologically appropriate and adaptable systems thinking, Köves embraces creativity to excite imaginaries, candle lights for erstwhile dark futures. Backcasting from utopian futures enables us to design bridges from where we are now and offers grounds for critical discourse and decision-making. Utopias, writes Köves, serve significant inspirational, motivational and modelling roles, including prefigurative signposts.

In Chapter 26 Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, combats the common line of argument that, while degrowth is appropriate for those who over-consume and for the planet, degrowth cannot address widespread poverty for which growth is considered essential. De Schutter goes as far as arguing that the pursuit of growth is counterproductive and shows how it can increase inequalities and social exclusion. Using degrowth approaches, he argues for a 'human rights economy' that is democratically driven, values what counts, rewards socially useful work and invests in satisfying basic needs.

The 'imperial mode of living', coined by co-authors Ulrich Brand and Marcus Wissen, and its alternative plurality of 'solidary modes of living' are both elaborated with reference to degrowth and the degrowth movement in Chapter 27. They address what these terms mean, and how transformations might be orchestrated from standardised, inequitable and regimented growth economies to plural, equitable and participatory polities and economies supporting everyday lives replete with qualitative values of degrowth. Such transformations mean new imaginaries, institutions, patterns of relationships and social structures in contrast to existing exploitative Global North unequal exchanges with the Global South. But who will be the agents of such transformations? They propose mobilisation via 'cells' of activists and quasi-activists formed within various spheres of the current system – workplaces, neighbourhoods, special interest groups – to enact degrowth futures.

In Chapter 28 Paul Stubbs charts the evolving non-aligned movement (NAM) in the second half of the 20th century, which was integral to the development of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) itself significant into the 21st century. He traces NAM's original focus on security and disarmament, and its engagement with issues of economic equity, the environment, sustainable development and decolonisation. Such geopolitical concerns parallel those initiating the independent rise of degrowth in the 21st century. The increasingly global scope of environmental matters impacts unevenly on member countries of the NAM, the NIEO, and the Global South. Today, decolonisation and addressing limits of sustainable development enable heterogenous degrowth perspectives to intervene with appropriate values and principles for local and global application within a non-aligned agenda.

Chapter 29 presents constructive ecofeminist and decolonial feminist critiques of gender and environmental relationships to argue for caring and regenerative degrowth approaches to everyday life, production and reproduction. Susan Paulson, Anna Saave and Sourayan Mookerjea offer three interconnected transitional directions for ecofeminist degrowth futures. The first turns contemporary globally unequal exchange based on fossil fuel metabolisms into bio-based and regionally reliant metabolisms; a shift from imperial to caring and commoning ways of life. The second moves from liberal feminism to indigenous and communitarian feminisms as well as caring masculinities based on collective intergenerational dignity and territory. The third transition is from a gendered colonialism that subordinates social reproduction and subsistence economies to current global markets, to ecofeminist recoveries focusing on practices of collective sufficiency that value both collectivity and commoning.

While ecofeminist and feminist contributions to degrowth theorising and practice have been significant, Bob Pease's Chapter 30 highlights the neglect of masculinity as a topic in degrowth scholarship. The chapter draws on degrowth critiques of economic growth, engages with emergent masculinities and environmental scholarship in degrowth, and critically reviews proposals to develop ecological and caring masculinities. Rather than simply arguing against hegemonic masculinity in order to foster degrowth subjectivities among men, Pease advocates a significant move for the degrowth movement beyond both masculinity per se and the gender binary more generally, to a gender-less (rather than gender-equal) society.

Federico Savini points out, in Chapter 31, the fallacies of the urban turn within planning, urbanist and futurist studies. A destructive urban–rural schism has resulted from a domineering growth logic driving cities into hives of overproduction and overconsumption even as socio-material inequity, marginalisation and displacement continue to increase. Extractivist dispossession and debt attend the growth of cities, challenging the urban formation in terms of size, colonisation and the built form. A degrowth urban agenda based on autonomy, finity and socio-ecological approaches would address such negative dynamics. Developing spatial degrowth practices can enhance the

political power needed to decouple the provisioning of essential services from increasing land values through economic innovation.

In Chapter 32 on degrowth-aligned commoning organisations, Ben Robra, Sabrina Chakori and Chris Giotitsas point to the generally unsatisfactory state of current work on business activities with respect to degrowth visions and transitions. To address questions related to re-designing business organisations and understanding their roles within a holistic degrowth agenda, they identify commoning as the most appropriate organisational form. Commoning allows for democratic self-organisation, locally customised provisioning of goods and services, and optimises possibilities for both community sufficiency and locally ecologically appropriate activities. Exemplars of a tool library and a community energy organisation illustrate how commoning organisations enable, even demand, politicisation of practitioners and communities. Thus, commoning is an ideal mode for the degrowth transition and vision.

Gareth Dale traces the development of ecosocialist thought within broader socialist traditions and its relationship to degrowth in Chapter 33, by surveying growth-sceptical and eco-socialist currents, and the 'productivist' socialisms that they challenge. In this account, Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier are emblematic pioneers; proto-ecosocialism is identified in works by Russian and Ukrainian Narodniks, and by Marx and Engels; ecosocialism benefits from creative thinkers, such as José Carlos Mariátegui and Walter Benjamin; and the rise of environmentalism in the last half-century contextualises a complex relationship between degrowth and ecosocialism.

Anuna De Wever and Lena Hartog ardently argue, in Chapter 34, for an overhauling of the currently unsustainable and exploitative global economy dynamised by neo-colonialism. They caution against the apparent solution of 'green growth', which would only prolong hierarchies of whiteness, neo-colonialism and European neo-imperialism. Instead, they counsel learning from global majorities and decolonial thinking, and allying with the climate movement to advance degrowth activism. Most particularly, they advocate for politicising degrowth narratives for futures of radical abundance, diversity, celebration, self-determination and freedom.

Finally, Chapter 35 by Anitra Nelson and Vincent Liegey engages with challenges for activist scholars and researchers of degrowth specifically in speculative terms of the content and form of a degrowth agenda (2025–).

Conclusion

The global workings of capitalist enterprises and institutions are secretive; production and distribution are determined by very few people and on the basis of their interests and profits. Monetary costs and prices weigh down capitalists' calculations in their plans and budgets, accounting practices, financial negotiations and arrangements, and targets for profits. All these quantitative gymnastics end up in perpetual growth Olympics by industry, by city, by sector, by region, by nation and in global statistics. Likewise, the capitalist state relies on economic growth for its very existence – measuring its economic progress in terms of GDP, financial stability and being seen as responsible for the economic welfare of its citizen voters.

In contrast, degrowth advocates seek a transparent and open world based on ecological and humane values, applying principles of social and ecological justice, political autonomy, conviviality, solidarity and ecologically sustainable living for everyone. Degrowth is an invitation to view the world anew in enchanting ways, to practice everyday life in alterity, to be deeply alive, responsible and respectful, relating to other people and the more-than-human world in ways that promise greater security, sustainability and freedom for all.

Most significantly, degrowth is a set of theories, principles and flexible practices, maintained by a movement whose primary aims address the contemporary existential reckoning. Degrowth is an invitation to embrace emancipation, to creatively explore new ways of living based on social and ecological values, and to establish decommodified economic systems embedded and maintained within deliberative and direct democracies.

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2

FOSSILISED METABOLISM

The social ecology of capitalist growth

Éric Pineault

Introduction

Growth in capitalist societies presents itself in a number of guises. Aggregate output growth of commodified goods and services, growth of labour, of productivity as well as of incomes, is captured by gross domestic product (GDP). Growth here presents itself as a monetary and economic phenomenon; it traces the expansion of the monetary production economy. In capitalist societies growth is also a powerful idea, tied to notions of progress and material abundance – in this instance, growth presents itself mainly as a core ideological tenet of modernity's sense of history (Schmelzer 2016). Finally, and most crucially, growth is also a material process that can be measured in tonnes of matter extracted and dissipated by the economic process of society (Pineault 2023), as well as hectares of ecosystems transformed by capitalist extractivism and urbanisation. It is this material and ecological dimension of capitalist growth that will be examined in this chapter.

A variety of critical theories of capitalist development have been formulated in modern societies, focusing on inequality, exploitation, alienation and domination. The historical specificity of critical theories of capitalist growth focuses on the materiality and ecology of capital or, more succinctly, on the metabolic foundations of capitalist accumulation and its ecological and social contradictions. This chapter will present and unfold the concepts necessary to critically understand capitalist growth as a material process that organises the contradictory and aporetic relations to nature of contemporary societies. It begins by presenting some aggregate measures of the material scale and material composition of contemporary capitalist economies. This is captured by the analysis of the throughput of capitalist economies and the formation of stocks using material flow accounting. Behind the vertiginous figures and numbers that record the trajectory of growth of advanced capitalist societies lies an underlying structural logic that is both social and material captured by the concept of socio-metabolic regime.

Fossil fuels are, of course, a defining feature of advanced capitalism's distinct metabolic regime and have profoundly shaped the structures and trajectory of accumulation as well as the ecological relations of modern societies. Social ecology abstracts from the concrete material determinations and properties of coal, oil and gas, a general metabolic logic that defines this regime as one where geological relations supersede ecological relations of society to nature under the aegis of capital and its growth imperative. This brings us to a last aspect of social ecology's contribution

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to the critique of capitalist growth, a socio-metabolic analysis of the growth imperatives of capitalism implies an *expanded* view of the economic process of capital based on four structural relations – extraction, production, consumption and dissipation – each a locus that regulates and modulates the growth and accumulation imperatives of capital. The socio-metabolic approach to capitalist growth presented in this chapter should not be seen as replacing or superseding other more classical critical perspectives. Rather it is a needed compliment to any research that claims in a large and inclusive way to propose a materialist account of the ecological contradictions of capitalism, and more generally to critical theories of capitalist development.

Capitalist extraction and material accumulation on a world scale

Growth in advanced capitalist economies is characterised by relations of mass consumption that realise the value of what has been massively produced. A more trenchant definition of the core mechanism of capitalist accumulation could be that it is based on the mass overconsumption of what has been overproduced; the main internal barrier to capitalist development in its advanced form being the problem of surplus absorption, a problem analysed by Baran and Sweezy (1966) 70 years ago (Feldman 2019) and by a larger Kaleckian and Post-Keynesian tradition of political economy (Lavoie 2022). The nature of the structural coupling of mass production and mass consumption has varied over time and space, but it has remained the main driver of economic growth (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2014). This structural coupling gives stability and legitimacy to the contradictory social relations of capitalist societies (Dörre et al. 2015). It is both a macroeconomic and sociopolitical requisite of accumulation.

What has been theorised as 20th-century Fordism implied a structural coupling in the capitalist core countries of the West mediated at a national level by the wage–labour relation and by working-class power (Aglietta 2000). The past three decades have seen a globalisation of mass production and, more recently, a highly unequal globalisation of mass consumption relations, which has led to more complex couplings and a relative marginalisation of working-class power as their main mediation. Yet the requisite remains, both output growth and continued accumulation in advanced capitalism still depend on the articulation of these relations of mass production and mass consumption. The perspective of social ecology, or socio-metabolic analysis, is an invitation to peer beyond these two relations – consumption and production – and takes into account the wider and more encompassing material flows on which they depend (Pineault 2023). The material flows we are about to explore are not passive reflections of commanding economic relations. In the realm of biophysical reality they fully exert their causalities and, thus, determine the economic process as well as the ecological relations of societies. To take into account this materiality of capitalist accumulation and its ecology, we must widen the analytical scope of the economic process. If there is mass production, from a metabolic perspective, there must be mass extraction. If there is mass consumption, then from a metabolic perspective, there will be mass dissipation and mass waste.

Social metabolism is thus based on an expanded view or conception of the economic process, where four structural relations mediate the accumulation of capital as shown in Figure 2.1. Extraction, production, consumption and dissipation together form the material throughput flow, a concept developed in metabolic analysis to account for this four-tiered structure. Furthermore, in this expanded view, the economic process is embedded in nature through two structural interfaces. Extraction is tied to sources of matter, and dissipation is tied to sinks for matter. Sources and sinks are not natural or given modes of existence of nature. They are how nature exists for extractive

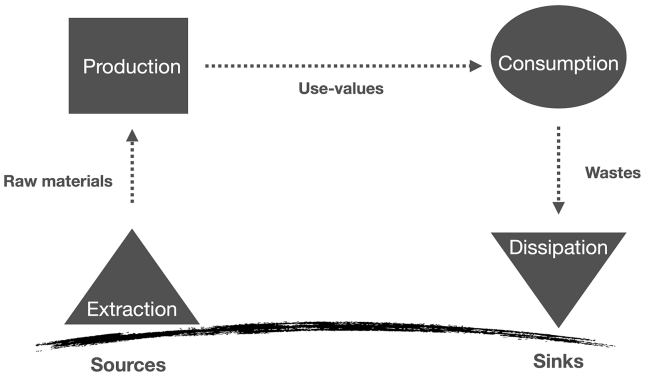

Figure 2.1 The metabolically expanded economic process.

and dissipative structures. For a detailed discussion, see Pineault (2023). Natural biophysical processes, such as biogeochemical cycles, ecosystems and geological processes, are not external and largely invisible; they are that in which social metabolism exists. This expanded economic process begins at the point of extraction, and this is where we will start our empirical enquiry into the mass flows that make capitalist growth.

Global material flows

The global flow of material extraction passed the threshold of 100 gigatonnes (Gt) in 2022 and is projected to reach 106Gt in 2024. In 1970, global extraction was 31Gt. In a little over half a century the material flow grew by 335 per cent. In terms of composition almost half (48%) of this flow is extracted in the form of non-metallic minerals (such as gravel, sand and limestone) used for roads, buildings and infrastructures. Biomass (mostly food and feed) accounts for 26 per cent, followed by fossil fuels (15%) and metal ores (10%). Figure 2.2 shows in detail the evolution of the composition of throughput flow since 1970 and its spectacular growth. Biomass extraction has doubled, extraction of fossil fuels has multiplied by 2.6, metal ores by 3.9, and non-metallic minerals by 5.3 times. Each of these categories can be refined further in subcategories of matter that make up the throughput flow; for example, biomass consists of the flows shown in Table 2.1. Flows for all forms of biomass have grown, crops and residues have the highest growth rates whereas fodder crops have grown the least, and most imply socio-ecological relations of extraction that are conflictual and unsustainable.

Looking at the throughput of fossil fuels from a mass flow perspective shows a material scenario at odds with current discourses on a global energy transition. As illustrated in Figure 2.3, all material flows of fossil fuels have grown, but coal and gas are the fuels that have seen the most important growth rates on a mass basis in the past 50 years. The extractive flow of natural gas has quadrupled over the half century and coal extraction has multiplied by 2.5, whereas petroleum has grown the least, at 1.88 times. Even if one adds unconventional or extreme forms of oil, such as fracked shale and tar sands, oil's growth is lower than those other fossil fuels – multiplying by 2.4 times. In the past decade, which roughly corresponds to the period covered by the Paris Agreement on climate change, coal extraction did reach a peak in 2013 of 7.8Gt, and then fell slightly. But it is projected to reach this level again in 2024, from 7.7Gt in 2023. Conventional petroleum reached

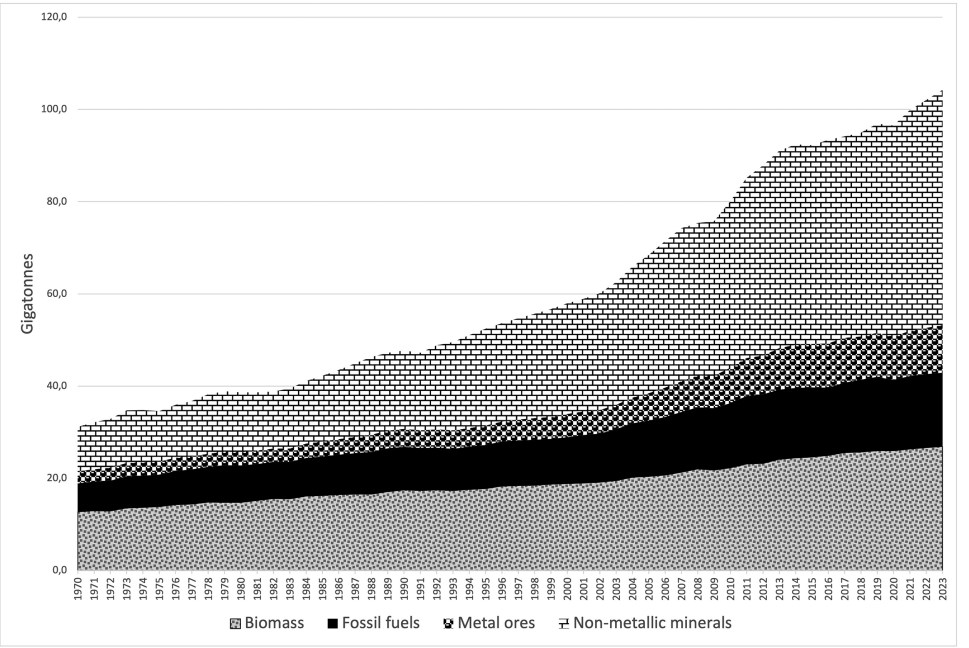

Figure 2.2 Global material extraction (1970–2023). Data sourced from UNEP IRP (2024).

Table 2.1 Global biomass extraction (2023). Data sourced from UNEP IRP (2024).

Biomass (Gt)	**Total (26.89)**	**Average growth p.a. 1970–2023**
Crop residues	8.14	3.21
Crops	9.81	3.01
Grazed biomass and fodder crops	6.39	1.26
Wild catch and harvest	0.08	1.76
Wood	2.47	1.44

a peak in 2018 at 4.4Gt, and should reach this level again in 2024. Gas, on the other hand, shows no sign of peaking. On the contrary, it has shown a consistent and strong growth rate over the past 50 years. This points to an essential feature of capitalist metabolism, the dependence of growth and accumulation on fossil fuels as sources of abstract energy, a question studied later in this chapter.

Material flows are entwined and linked with each other in relations of mutual extractive interdependence. Obviously, oil is a core complement to all extractive flows because of the centrality of internal combustion engines in the economic process. Biomass flows depend on the conversion of natural gas into nitrogen-based fertilisers, and approximately 2Gt of minerals in the form of potash, phosphates and limestones were needed in 2023 to grow the 24Gt of extracted biomass. Coal and iron flows are deeply entwined, although steel production is shifting at the margins to dependence on gas flows through hydrogen-based iron reduction. Steel and other nonferrous metals, such

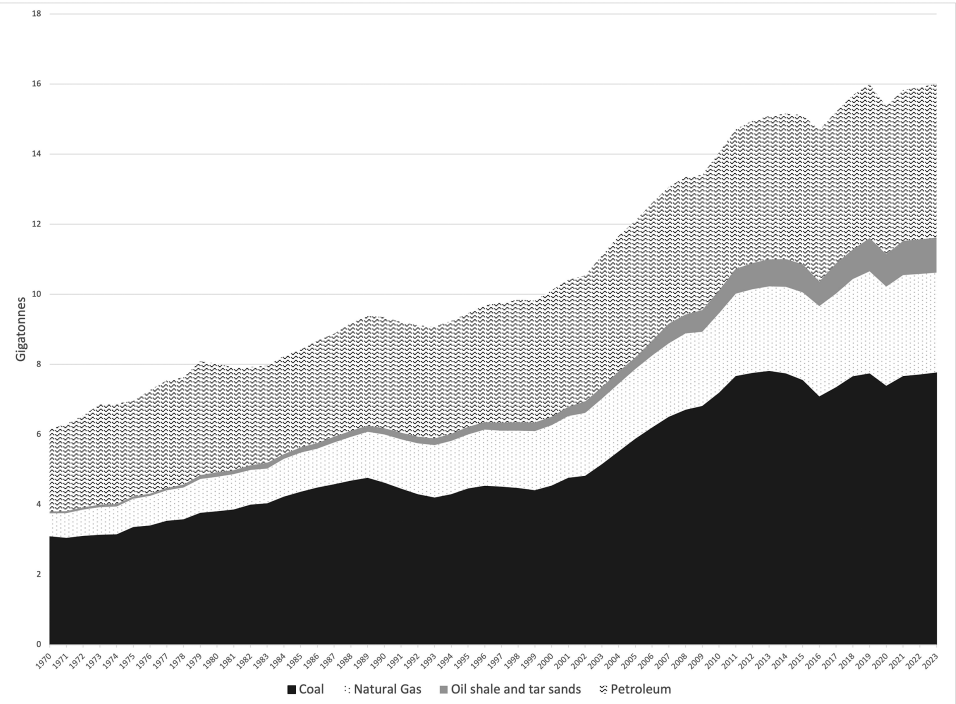

Figure 2.3 Global extraction of fossil fuels (1970–2023). Data sourced from UNEP IRP (2024).

as aluminium and copper, are also symbiotically embedded with most, if not all, other material flows (Schaffartzik et al. 2016).

By far the largest component of mass flows are construction materials extracted as non-metallic minerals, basically sand, stone and gravel, which make and shape the concrete infrastructures and buildings of contemporary societies. Both the extraction and transformation of the materials needed to make concrete structures imply a diversity of other linked flows, from oil to power machines, to coal to heat limestone, to iron to reinforce concrete structures, and to copper to wire them.

As capitalist economic relations expanded, penetrating evermore economies and societies, mass material flows followed the same trend, exports growing more than fourfold since 1970, from 2.2Gt to 9.8Gt in 2023. Some flows have always been global, such as oil and iron ores, but starting in the 1990s a growing number of other materials started to flow globally – crops and crop residues, natural gas, wild catch (fisheries), industrial and agricultural minerals show the most important growth. The exceptions are those non-metallic minerals used in construction, too bulky, not very valuable and widely available, but even this is changing as a global cement market is taking shape with the development of dedicated deep water sea terminals and global overcapacity in cement production. Comprising only 10 per cent of materials flowing worldwide in 2023, these flows have seen the highest growth, rate as shown in Table 2.2.

What are the socio-ecological implications of increasingly globalised material flows? A structural implication is the growing spatial disconnect between extraction, transformation, use and dissipation, which has created new dependencies on long economic circuits and the global corporations that control these circulating flows. Consequently, the increasing capacity to externalise

Table 2.2 Exported fraction of extracted throughput globally (2023). Data sourced from UNEP IRP (2024).

Exported global throughput type	Mass flow volume in tonnes (2023)	Percentage of total exported throughput (2023)	Growth rate 1970–2023
Biomass	2,049,544,279	21	5.4
Fossil fuels	4,266,843,612	43	3.1
Metal ores	2,557,194,839	26	6.5
Non-metallic minerals	991,378,071	10	8.5
Total throughput	9,864,960,801	100	4.4

the ecological and social burdens and costs of extraction away from those societies consuming the material flows, the same possibility exists with dissipative flows, as aptly captured by research on unequal ecological exchange (Dorninger et al. 2021). A third consequence is a highly unequal material footprint between different societies, the possibility for core world regions to appropriate, use and dissipate a greater share of the global throughput than more peripheral regions, a distinctive feature of Brand and Wissen's concept of the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2021, Chapter 27, this volume).

Material flow accounting tools can capture this global inequality in material consumption. Two metrics have been designed, domestic material consumption (DMC) and material footprint (MF), and both can express throughput flows on a per capita basis for different world regions and countries. The first measures extracted matter, subtracts what is exported, and adds in imports. A common misunderstanding of DMC is to think that it measures individual consumption patterns, which it does not. It traces the wider overall absorption of extracted matter by an economy, without regard to its end use. Material flows can find their way into consumption goods, some durable, some not, but they also can be fixed as capital in machines, buildings, or public goods and infrastructures. DMC measures inequalities between economies and societies not between individuals and, like the MF, it ignores intra-social inequalities tied to class, race and gender. Figure 2.4 traces the evolution of DMC for a selection of world regions and highlights continental inequalities and temporal variability of material consumption. Data for North America shows a strong sensitivity of material consumption to the economic cycle. Growth of DMC is clear in the cases of China and Latin America, but at highly different rates. DMC has been relatively stable in Europe and Africa. The overall picture is one of inequality between world regions. Three metabolic groups clearly stand out: North America and China at approximately 26t per capita, Europe and Latin America at 16t per capita, and Africa at 5t per capita.

The seeming current proximity between China and North America, and Latin America and Europe, which resembles a phenomenon of convergence is actually misleading. It can be corrected by extending the metabolic analysis with an MF indicator. The difference between MF and DMC is significant in measuring material inequality as a relational phenomenon. Throughput measured as MF not only looks at imported material flows but also adds the matter extracted inside the exporting territory to produce the imported matter, dissipated matter that is embedded in the export. A simple example would be the coal burnt in a blast furnace to produce exportable iron. Whereas DMC captures the differential weight of economies, MF captures the global appropriation of matter by the throughput of a given economy. For the year 2023, the MF of North America was 32t per capita whereas China was 25t per capita, nearer the European average of 20t per capita. Latin

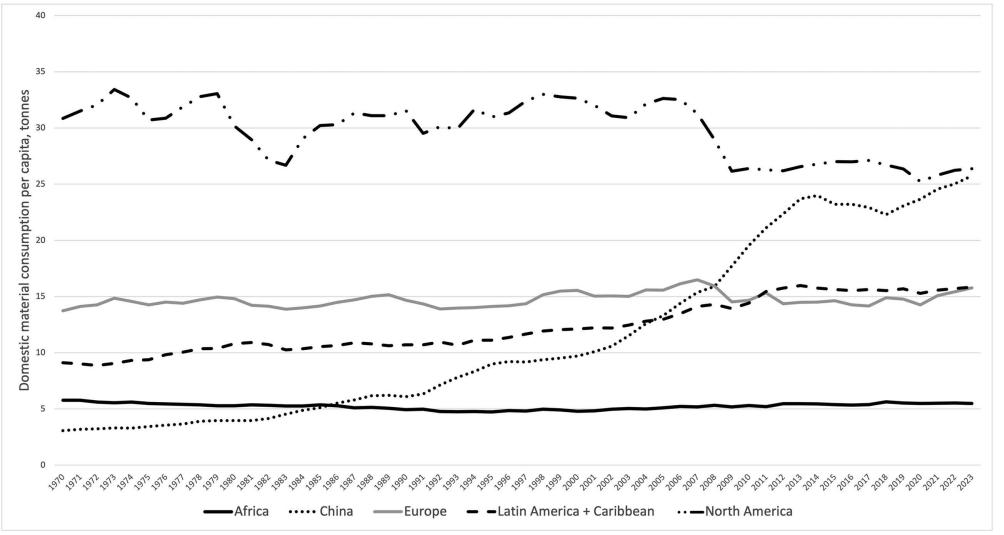

Figure 2.4 Domestic material consumption per capita for world regions. Data sourced from UNEP IRP (2024).

American and Caribbean countries were 12t, close to the world average of 13t and double the European average, whereas Africa sat at 4t per capita. The discrepancy between core and periphery as captured by MF analysis shows core capitalist economies appropriating an unfair share of global extraction and shifting the costs of extraction to the periphery.

The accumulation of material stocks

Some elements of the global throughput are dissipated almost as fast as they are extracted. For example, most of the biomass extracted will rapidly flow through the economic process metabolised by animal or human bodies, and a large proportion of extracted fossil fuels will power machines and energy systems. Yet some paper will find its way into archives or be bound as books in libraries, wood will be used in construction and manufacturing, and some oil will become plastics and might find its way into durable goods. Almost all metals and non-metallic minerals (58 per cent of the extracted throughput in 2023) will be used as building, manufacture and construction materials. This large fraction of the throughput becomes accumulated material stocks, which have important socio-ecological implications (Pauliuk and Müller 2014). They include infrastructures such as roads, dams and sewer systems, buildings and like-constructed structures, as well as artefacts, from small mundane durable objects to large machines, such as supertankers or bucket wheel excavators. Contrary to common conceptions of growth, the materiality of contemporary societies is not dominated by flows of single-use throw-away products, in mass terms these are dwarfed by the flows that are directed towards the accumulation of the material structures of capitalist societies. This is captured by the global throughput flow data in Figure 2.5, showing the uses of the global aggregate flow of extracted matter over the 20th century. In the early 20th century biomass flows still account for half of the extracted throughput, meaning many societies still have a strong agrarian base. A dramatic shift in use occurs at the global level after 1950, stock building materials shift to an exponential growth pattern and rapidly dwarf other material use categories.

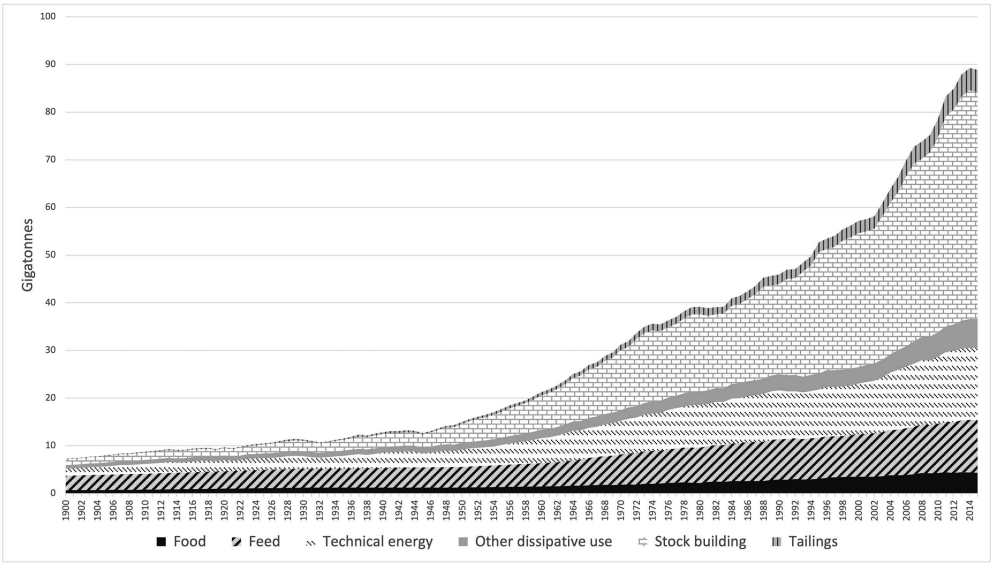

Figure 2.5 Global accumulation of material use. Data sourced from Krausmann et al. (2018).

Pioneer ecological economist Nicolai Georgescu Roegen used Lotka's category of exosomatic organs to understand the socio-metabolic nature of these structures as biophysical extensions of human bodies that mediate societal relations to the environment. In a sense the massive bucket wheel excavators that rip lignite coal out of open pit mines in eastern Germany are 'just' an extension of the human hand, as is the handheld plough I use to hill my potato patch. Other researchers close to degrowth, such as Alf Hornborg (2022), conceptualise material stocks as a 'technomass', highlighting the interconnectedness of the mass of technological artefacts on which rests the global economic process of capital – a mass that feeds off energy and material flows, just as biomass results from net primary production through the photosynthetic activity of autotrophs. Stocks in this sense are linked to flows.

The concept of exosomatic organs highlights the fact that artefacts and accumulated stocks provide material services to society, and thus defines them through a technical and functionalist lens (Haberl et al. 2017). This tends to veil the relations of power or cultural mediations that regulate the accumulation of stocks (Plank et al. 2021). The technomass concept highlights the global nature of the material and energy flows needed to accumulate and sustain material stocks in a given society. Stocks thus command flows from this perspective, and the highly unequal nature of the economic relations that preside over these flows is captured by Hornborg (2022) and others through unequal ecological exchange analysis, and illustrated in MF analyses.

In modern capitalist societies a further determination of stocks is their existence as objects of property. Put another way, social relations with accumulated stocks are governed by the institution of modern property, different social relations implying different forms of property and different modes of governance of stocks. For example, accumulated stocks can exist as fixed capital owned by large corporations with very different implications from, say, an accumulated stock in the form of a house that belongs to a person or an accumulated stock in the form of a primary school that belongs to the state. Above and beyond the material services that each structure can provide, they

are subject to different social relations. In a capitalist economy, one determining aspect is the valorisation imperative that governs the existence of material stocks as fixed capital, their formation, their reproduction in time, and their use, all of which also determine the flows of matter that they will command. Assetisation of accumulated material stocks such as buildings, whether commercial, residential or privatised public infrastructures, also has similar implications stemming from a financialised valorisation imperative (Golka et al. 2024).

The metabolic nexus

Matter does not accumulate on its own into stocks nor does the mass throughput flow on its own wilful accord. Rock will erode, sand and gravel will be moved about by running water, trees will fall and oil will seep, the occasional fish might even jump up into a boat, but mass extraction, mass flows, mass accumulation and mass dissipation all imply directed and reflexive *social* practices. We have already mentioned how stocks and flows are entwined and articulated, stocks commanding flows, and flows forming stocks, these articulations are further mediated by social practice in a metabolic nexus bringing all three together. And social practice, from a socio-ecological perspective, is mediated by norms, institutions, power and culture, entwined in capitalist social relations. As mentioned, the institution of property – as a social relation to thingness in capitalism – determines and mediates the existence of material stocks.

We could examine the labour process at the point of production or the provisioning and reproductive process at the point of consumption and analyse how their nexus articulates together flows, stocks and labour or consumptive practices. The same could be examined at the point of extraction and social dissipation. From a socio-metabolic standpoint, social practices, the accumulation of matter in stocks and material flows, all happen together and cannot be understood in isolation. Oil will flow only through rigs and pipes because a capitalist somewhere has sunk his capital in the capacity to extract, and another in the material capacity to refine, distribute and ultimately sell the oil to a holder of means of combustion. A machine equipped with an internal combustion engine (a stock) will burn oil to provide some form of material service that mediates a social practice such as driving or heating. But, inversely, personal practices of mobility in advanced capitalist societies are massively mediated by hydrocarbon flows and stocks of machine-like artefacts, themselves built out of flows of metal, oil (plastics) and coal. In this three-tier nexus, no strictly

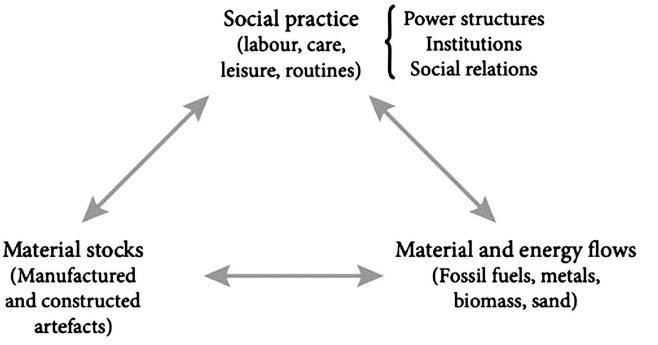

Figure 2.6 The socio-metabolic nexus of stocks, flows and practices.

bilateral relations exist. A social relation to a stock always implies flows, and a social relation to flow, is always mediated by a stock. These are the basic building blocks or element forms of socio-metabolic relations. Figure 2.6 illustrates the metabolic nexus.

The materiality of capital accumulation

In a capitalist economy, accumulation of capital is the prime driver and determinant of the overall direction and content of the economic process. Looking at the metabolic nexus, this means that the accumulation of capital shapes the relations between practices, stocks and flows, all the while being subject to the biophysical forces and causalities of the materialities harnessed and deployed in the economic process. We can explore this through the lens of the classical distinction in Marx's *Capital* between production as labour process and as a valorisation process. If we examine the metabolic nexus where social practice presents itself as labour, material stocks appear in the guise of means of production subject to various institutional rules and norms that include private property. In commons and other collective forms of tenure, the material flows of energy and matter, the throughput, appears for Marx in the guise of a flow of use-values, again circulating according to diverse social norms and institutions. Observed as a valorisation process, that is from the vantage point of capitalist practice, things appear differently. Accumulated material stocks – artefacts, machines, structures and buildings – exist as fixed capital and the material flow is commodified. The nexus approach implies that there can be no accumulation of capital without accumulation of material stocks and flows of commodified extracted matter. It evidently also implies that there can be no commodity production or circulation without material flows mediated by material stocks. A further characteristic is that fixed capital will be determined by the relations at the point at which it is formed along the throughput structure. In particular, capital accumulates at the points of extraction and dissipation according to a logic that cannot be reduced to the functional needs of production and consumption for matter and energy. The nature and scale of the throughput flow and its ecological consequences at the extractive and dissipative frontiers of the economic process are a contested reality produced by the encounter of different logics of accumulation, rather than a passive expression of the equilibrium between supply and demand for raw materials or waste management.

Capitalist metabolism and fossil fuel-based growth

In the first part of this chapter, we examined in a descriptive fashion the global flows and metabolic structures, or anatomy, of contemporary capitalist economies. We introduced an ecologically expanded view of the economic process based on four nodal points of metabolic transformations of the throughput, as illustrated in Figure 2.1. And we argued that capital is determined by this metabolic structure, meaning that its accumulation and valorisation processes have a materiality and that they are determined by the metabolic stock–flow-practice nexus as presented. In this second part, we examine what is specific about capitalist metabolism, how the trajectory of capitalist development has shaped the ecological relations and materiality of contemporary societies and their patterns of growth. Less empirical, this section is more theoretical in nature.

Although capitalist economies emerged in what social ecologists have conceptualised as 'agrarian metabolic regimes' (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 1997), fossil-based metabolic regimes have developed them into what they are today. It is through their fossil-based metabolism that they have subsumed so many aspects of social and natural life that we can speak of capitalist societies based on open-ended unlimited growth. We will thus follow this movement of subsumption, from

agrarian metabolism to contemporary fossil-based capitalist metabolism, through a comparison of the properties and characteristics of these regimes. (For a detailed historical account of this complex trajectory, see Pirani 2018). The aim is to pinpoint what is specific about contemporary capitalist metabolism from a structural standpoint. This comparative inquiry implies first a conceptual clarification.

The concept of social metabolism in social ecology

Humans, like all living beings, exist through constant metabolic interactions with other living beings and the abiotic components of their habitat – the ecosystems which emerge out of these biophysical relations. But for humanity, this individual metabolic relationship to the world is subsumed by social relations, symbolic practice and social structure (Freitag 2011). Human metabolism is a social metabolism in a fundamental sense that the former has subsumed to its logic the latter. Social metabolism is not an analogy; it is the real mediation of these biophysical relations at the societal level (Pineault 2023), just as the ecological relations of the human animal are a 'social' ecology, because they are mediated by social relations. Social ecologists use the concept of socio-metabolic regime to define these society–nature relations and structures (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl 1997).

Capitalist metabolism can then be defined as a socio-metabolic regime determined and oriented by capitalist social relations. The metabolic relations of societies that concern our inquiry can be examined as both material and energetic flows that societies mobilise in the course of their reproduction. In the first half of this chapter we focused on material flows while this second part will take into account energy flows as a basis to singularise capitalist metabolism. It can be argued, following Sieferle (2001), that it is only in capitalist societies that flows of energy are represented, objectified and regulated by social processes. Most other societies are based on an agrarian metabolism and are acutely conscious and able to act upon their material flows, but energy does not have an objective cultural existence. That being said, looking at metabolism through energy flows does highlight the historical specificity of capitalist societies and their unique growth drivers (Hornborg 2023).

A simple definition of energy can be the capacity to do work. In a hunter-gatherer society, this capacity to do work is mainly mediated by the muscular exertions of human bodies, with the addition of the work performed by the heat of fire. The energy needed to sustain muscular exertions is secured through ecological relations of gathering and hunting, the social metabolism of hunter-gatherer societies is directly embedded in given ecological relations. The 'given' here must be taken with a certain grain of salt, since these societies always actively shape ecosystems through intentional and unintentional interventions, but they also do so through relations that mobilise the autonomy of ecological processes. The scale and intensity of these interventions is marginal when compared to other ecological determinants and factors, and small when compared to agrarian societies.

Agrarian metabolism rests on the intentional production of simplified and socially controlled ecosystems which are highly artificial, have low ecological autonomy and, thus, require constant human and animal labour to remain in a state that is far from ecological equilibrium in a given biome but is productive for society. From a metabolic standpoint, the objective is to use certain plants (grains in particular) to capture and convert solar energy into useful energy through photosynthesis. Human societies control net primary production, which they appropriate as a biophysical surplus, which then circulates according to social relations. Another means to this end is using

certain herbivores to access primary production in non-grain forms through pasturing. This energy is then transformed through human and animal consumption into a capacity to do work based on muscular activity. As in hunter-gatherer societies, social metabolism is primarily mediated by the bodily metabolism of humans and labouring animals. To this is further added the work obtained by combustion and certain mechanical forces such as water wheels, windmills and sails. As argued by Larry Lohmann (Lohmann and Hildyard 2021), the historical specificity of the mobilisation of these capacities to do work is their 'concreteness'. The kinetic energies of running water or blowing wind are directly and locally transferred, via gears, into mechanical work, and the heat obtained from the combustion of charcoal or fossil coal is directly mobilised as heat to accomplish chemical alterations in matter.

Contemporary fossil-based metabolism has abstracted energy flows out these discrete and particular contexts via the production of electricity, which can be retransformed into almost all forms of energy: mechanical, kinetic, heat, light, chemical and so on. The same can be said of the way fossil fuels are used to power machines as prime movers through steam or internal combustion engines. In fossil-based social metabolism, this energetic relation between machines as prime movers and flows of abstract energy dwarfs the energetic relations that link the metabolism of human bodies with harvested grain or other sources of biomass. In modern and contemporary fossil-based societies exosomatic organs and their energy demands have progressively embedded themselves in the economic process and structures of reproduction, becoming necessary and core mediations of social practice. A straightforward illustration of this is captured by the average per capita primary energy consumption that can be estimated for these different metabolic regimes, a proxy of their energy intensity, or 'metabolic rate' (Fischer-Kowalski and Schaffartzik 2015).

According to estimates by Fischer-Kowalski and Schaffartzik (2015), hunter-gatherer societies have an average metabolic rate of 11 gigajoules per capita per year. This is 3.7 times the basic metabolic rate of the human body or, put another way, hunter-gatherer societies rely on a biophysical surplus (in energy terms) of three to four times the biological needs of the bodies of their members. Most of this surplus takes the form of fire used for cooking, heating (including artefact production) and landscape management. Agrarian societies tend to use 16 times more energy than the basic metabolic rate, at 50 gigajoules per capita per year, while fossil-based societies need an average 200 gigajoules per capita per year to animate their mass of exosomatic organs and reproduce their structures. The energy use of fossil-based societies is thus 66 times the basic human metabolic rate. This quantitative leap from agrarian to fossil metabolism manifests a profound qualitative change in the social relation to energy, the imperative or constraint, according to Hornborg (2020), to feed a growing technomass. For the purposes of this chapter, this change will be examined as a qualitatively different 'fossil' mode of existence of the economic surplus and its implications for capitalist accumulation as a driver of growth.

The limits of agrarian metabolic regimes from the standpoint of capital

The economic process of agrarian societies, including those with relatively developed capitalist social relations (Wrigley 2010), is bounded by the constraint to generate a biophysical surplus through ecological relations, which *in fine* rests on net primary production or photosynthetic activity. This is a core theme of classical political economy and explains the importance for Adam Smith and David Ricardo of the theory of diminishing marginal returns of investment in agriculture. This means that economic growth is limited by ecological productivity, that growth has a real nature tied to land use change, what social ecologists term social colonisation of ecosystems

typical of agrarian-based production systems (Fischer-Kowalski and Weisz 1999). Finally, in this metabolic regime, the surplus arises as a result of past metabolic activity; it is co-produced by plants, animals and humans.

Though there is room for improvement and intensification, in the end the limits to growth and expansion are those of the metabolic activity of these living beings, what feminist economists have conceptualised as reproductivity (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010). Economic growth beyond this barrier of reproductivity tends towards a zero-sum logic, where one's gain is another's direct loss and the logic of pillage replaces struggles of distribution over the spoils of a given surplus. This might explain the elective affinity between mercantile capitalism, colonialism and modern chattel slavery (Inikori 1989). In a sense the sugar cane plantation could paradoxically be considered the most advanced possible form of capitalist surplus extraction in an agrarian metabolic regime (Hornborg 2020), its limit being that extraction is still bounded by ecological productivity.

Extraction of fossil fuels as the basis for a new metabolic regime

In its historical development, capitalism overcomes this barrier to growth and accumulation by shifting the basis of social metabolism from an ecological surplus to a geological surplus of 'already accumulated' sources of energy in the form of fossil fuels. These become core determinants of the economic process from extraction to dissipation. Instead of presenting itself as direct and embodied surplus in plants, animals and humans through their capacity to act and grow, the surplus presents itself as something much more abstract – the general capacity to perform physical work. Once extracted, fossil fuels can immediately be put to work as abstract energy driving a growing number of 'exosomatic' organs – machines. This extraction is not reproductive in a double sense. On the one hand, fossil fuels are a non-renewable form of matter, a biophysical stock, the opposite of what agrarian societies draw from their fields, forests and living bodies of water. On the other hand, extractive activity itself gains autonomy from reproductive ecological limits by applying the energy obtained from fossil fuels to the work needed to extract more fossil fuels and other geological sources of matter that become critical to modern capitalist societies: iron, copper, aluminium, cement, sand, gravel and concrete.

All human societies have transformed and put to use, for various purposes, from instrumental to aesthetic, materials of geological origin: rocks, minerals, clays, metals and of course, peat, coal, oil and gas. But the extraction and the transformation of these materials were always mediated and limited by the bodily metabolism of human and animal labour, and their reproductivity. Sources of heat needed to transform these substances were also mainly of biological origin – a notable exception being the Song dynasty period in China (Pomeranz 2021). The fossil-based metabolic regime of capital overcomes this limit. Progressively at first in the case of coal, which implies many inputs of biological origin including construction wood in mining shafts and extensive use of human and animal labour well into the 20th century, but exponentially as oil and gas are added as core sources of abstract energy (Pirani 2018).

The constraint of this new metabolic regime is not surplus generation through rational husbandry and improvement (Warde 2018) but efficient surplus use through optimised and less wasteful prime movers and machines, the object of thermodynamics (Daggett 2019; Lohmann and Hildyard 2014). The first locus of application of this geological surplus is to expand and enhance extractive activity itself in a self-reinforcing loop; because of economies of scale, marginal returns are positive when capital accumulates at the point of extraction (Wrigley 2010). The fossil surplus also progressively reshapes the production of biomass by capitalist societies. Instead of working

inside ecological relations, agriculture and forestry industrialise and take on extractive features, eventually becoming a net energy sink instead of an energy source as yields become dependent on the application of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. The abstract nature of the surplus on which the modern development of capitalist economies has been based is real. Through fossil fuels, capital has been able to extract and abstract itself from the ecological constraints that limited its early development. The biophysical constraint faced by capital in this new context becomes how to entropically absorb this massive pre-existing geological surplus in a way that produces value. Exponential economic growth provides the answer to this problem.

The historical trajectory of this regime is then characterised by a series of energy additions as new sources of abstract energy are integrated in the metabolic nexus of capitalist growth and accumulation. Historians and theorists of capitalism have proposed many ways of understanding this trajectory, in phases and periods. What stands out from the perspective of social metabolism are the material interdependencies that have marked certain periods of accumulation. Iron and coal in the 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by steel and oil, the centrality of concrete from the mid-20th century onwards, and the importance of gas and coal for electricity generation in this same period. Then, the advent and generalisation of plastics and, finally, the omnivorous nature of capitalist metabolism in the early 21st century because of the development of new electronic and digital technologies as well as those linked to the deployment of renewable energy systems (Greenfield and Graedel 2013). The long-term historical data we have on the extraction of different materials during the capitalist age shows how these different material combinations have played different roles in the accumulation process. Sometimes central, sometimes more marginal, the one continuity is the absence of substitution effects, again from a socio-metabolic perspective. Some materials might have been replaced in one area of the economic process, or displaced elsewhere, but the overall result is a growth of mass extraction for all materials.

Conclusion: a fossilised transition?

Capitalist economies and societies are faced today with a new ecological imperative of a radically different nature than the constraints it faced in agrarian metabolism. They have a sink problem called climate change. The geological sources of abstract energy that sustained accumulation for over two centuries are carbon that was geologically sequestered and excluded from the ecological cycles and earth processes that have shaped the earth's climate since the Carboniferous and Permian period for coal (359 to 252M years ago) and the Mesozoic Era (252 to 66M years ago) for most oil and gas deposits. For capitalist growth to continue all the while mitigating climate change, access to abstract energy is key, and from a capitalist standpoint this can be secured in two ways.

A first solution is to develop sources of abstract energy in a decarbonised form; a second answer is capital accumulation directly at the point of dissipation of CO_2 to technologically mimic the geological sequestration that had shielded the earth system from its impacts. Both solutions face material and physical constraints that are actively debated in relevant disciplines. They imply massive investment and could be overly costly to implement (IPCC 2023). Up until now renewable energy production has been merely additive and not undertaken in a substitutive manner (York and Bell 2019). Because of material complementarities, full decarbonisation of the economic process is highly challenging. A third solution is resorting to biogenic carbon, but this brings the accumulation of capital full circle back to the ecological limits of net primary production.

The difficulties of a capitalist transition are further compounded by the social property relations of these economies and the way they are embedded in the metabolic nexus, as previously examined. Fossil fuels are core material aspects of modern capitalist metabolism, just as grain

was a core feature of agrarian metabolism with deep social implications (Scott 2017). The artefacts and material stocks accumulated by these societies are dependent on the flow of these materials through the economic process, from extraction (oil and gas fields, pipelines, coal mines, reserves) to production and consumption, to dissipation and waste. These material stocks form a vast aggregate of fixed capital spread throughout the whole economy and in various stages of amortisation and depreciation. It would be a mistake to presume that the owners and beneficiaries of this accumulated capital will passively let their assets be stranded by an energy transition from fossil metabolic flows (Gellert and Ciccantell 2020), in particular, large monopolistic corporations that dominate advanced capitalist economies. On the contrary, as recent developments in hydrogen-based energy systems reveal (Vezzoni 2024), they will actively shape or slow this transition to protect their fixed capital assets (Christophers 2022). Because these include long-lived tangible and intangible assets, such as intellectual property and extractable reserves, the hysteresis effect is potentially immense, with fossil capital and fossil-dependent capital steering the transition process in a direction compatible with its economic interests instead of the ecological imperatives of keeping the planet habitable for humans. And, even if capitalist economies and fossil capital were able to progressively shift their material base away from fossil fuels, the social metabolism would remain energy intensive and dependent on growing mass abstract energy flows which, if produced by renewables, face unresolved ecological and biophysical contradictions of their own (Altvater and Mahnkopf 2019; Izoard 2024).

As the data on the metabolic profile of capitalist economies has shown at the beginning of this chapter, the materiality of economic growth is wider than the sole question of fossil fuel extraction. Mass extraction of all materials necessary for capitalist economies has grown exponentially over the past one hundred years, extractive and dissipative processes and activities have globalised and imply the planet as a whole. Capitalist accumulation has come to depend on a globalised relation of mass overconsumption validating mass overproduction, this structural feature of capitalist economies implies mass extraction and mass dissipation and waste. These are the inescapable features of contemporary capitalism that the expanded view of the economic process proposed by social ecology reveals. The socio-ecological contradictions of a social metabolism dependent on these flows and accumulations of material stocks are diverse and deep. Using the language of planetary boundaries (Rockstrom et al. 2009), they appear in the way capitalist agriculture is embedded in the global phosphorous and nitrogen cycle through dissipative flows; how biomass extraction impacts biodiversity and land use change; how the growth of non-metallic mineral extraction and accumulation of this material in infrastructures and urbanised spaces also impacts these barriers. Moreover, how all these extractive processes are tied in a non-sustainable way to freshwater cycles in local and regional ecosystems and how the diversity and volume of flows of complex synthetic materials in the throughput of capitalist economies imply the dissipation in ecosystems of novel chemical entities that living beings have not learned to interact with and that disrupt their metabolism.

With others, we have argued that a social metabolism inside planetary boundaries would imply moving away from growth-based capitalist economies (Brand et al. 2021). It would imply embracing, for rich countries, and the rich individuals among them, a path of energy descent and deeply lower metabolically intense modes of living (Hickel and Kallis 2020; Hickel 2021; Fanning et al. 2020). Proponents of degrowth and post-growth have long been the harbingers of such postcapitalist futures. As a scholarly and academic endeavour, degrowth and post-growth research focuses as much on the critique of growth-dependent economies and societies, capitalism in particular, as well as on the institutional, cultural and economic contours of futures beyond growth. Social ecology's particular contribution to both these projects is an analytical tool kit able to capture the

materiality of the economic process and the language of social metabolism that describes societal–nature relations and their viability or aporetic character.

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3
UNEQUAL USES OF EARTH

Timothée Parrique

This chapter presents a sequence of four stylised facts on the relation between economic growth and global inequality. Global economic growth mostly benefits those who are already rich (*Fact 1*) while hampering the capacities for development of the poorest (*Fact 2*); today's richest are the main cause of most cases of ecological breakdown (*Fact 3*), which harms the poorest first and hardest (*Fact 4*). I will use this four-step line of reasoning to justify the need for degrowth – a planned downscaling of production and consumption in affluent regions of the world aimed at reducing environmental pressures – so as to, among other things, safeguard natural resources and environmental amenities for those whose needs remain unmet.

Fact 1: Growth enriches the rich

In the past 50 years, world gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a yearly 3 per cent. Global per capita GDP increased by 2.4 times, reaching US$11,600 in 2020 (UNEP 2024a, p. 22). Most of that growth occurred in the Global North. Half a century ago, 81 per cent of global GDP was concentrated in high-income economies (where gross national income was greater than US$13,846), and mostly in Europe and North America. It was still 61 per cent in 2020 (UNEP 2024a, p. 21), even though most of the population growth since the 1950s has been happening in countries not in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (De Schutter 2024, p. 16). This change in the composition of world GDP is explained by the fast growth of upper-middle-income countries like China, Russia and Brazil, which increased their share of world GDP from 14 per cent in 1970 to 29 per cent in 2020. While lower-middle-income economies like India, Tanzania and Ukraine doubled their 1970 share of 5 per cent by 2020, the share attributed to low-income nations – countries with a national income per capita lower than US$1,135 – has remained stagnant at 0.6 per cent of world GDP in the past 50 years.

This consolidation of wealth in the Global North might seem counter-intuitive, given the relatively small yearly rates of GDP growth observed in high-income economies compared to other poorer yet faster-growing nations. And yet, a slow rate of growth of a large GDP can yield more extra wealth than the fast growth rate of nations with a small GDP. For example, currently, 0.9 per cent growth in a country like France adds US$23.7bn to GDP in a single year. To achieve the same gain, Ethiopia would need to grow its GDP by 18 per cent, more than three times its current

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growth rates. This explains why, despite seemingly fast rates of growth, the divide between the richest and poorest is still widening. While the average per capita income in rich countries was 28 times higher than in low-income countries in 1970, this ratio is expected to double in 2024 (UNEP 2024a, p. 22).

These high levels of income inequality result from an even more unequal distribution of wealth. In 2021, the richest 10 per cent of individuals on Earth (~700M people) owned 76 per cent of total wealth, while the top 1 per cent (~60M people) possessed 38 per cent of all existing wealth (Chancel et al. 2021, p. 27). Meanwhile, the 2.8bn poorest people – representing half of the world adult population – accounted for only 2 per cent of the world's wealth. Because the wealth accumulated by a minority of the population gets reinvested in ventures with rates of return superior to the growth in average income (Piketty 2014), the higher the levels of wealth inequality, the more unequal the split of economic growth. This is what Milanovic (2019, p. 31) calls 'the curse of wealth' – as countries become richer, the share of capital income in total net income is bound to increase, which accelerates the divide between the lucky few who own assets and the rest of the population whose sole income derives from their labour.

This simple snowball dynamics explains why the global richest 10 per cent receive 52 per cent of all income, compared to the meagre 8.5 per cent that goes to the bottom 50 per cent (Chancel et al. 2021, p. 27). To put this gap in perspective, the average monthly income of the poorest half of humanity is €230 per month, 31 times lower than what the upper decile earns (€7,300 per month). Despite providing 90 per cent of all the labour mobilised in global production, the Global South only receives 44 per cent of global income (Hickel et al. 2024, p. 2).

Between 1990 and 2001, only US$0.60 out of every additional US$100 in global income per capita ended up improving the situation of people living under US$1 per day (Simms and Woodward 2006). Between 1999 and 2010, US$111 of additional growth in global GDP was required to achieve a US$1 reduction in poverty (Woodward 2015). The same pattern was repeated the decade after that one. Between 2010 and 2020, only 1 per cent of the increase in world spending went to extremely poor households (Kharas 2020). Between 2020 and 2022, the richest 1 per cent captured almost two-thirds of all new wealth, nearly twice as much money as the rest of the population (Christensen et al. 2023). The bottom line is that economic growth is predominantly captured by a small minority of people who are already rich.

If this is true, advocating for more growth is a dubious strategy to fight destitution. This is why Olivier De Schutter, the current United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, writes on the back cover of *The Poverty of Growth* (De Schutter 2024) that the 'the quest for growth not only clashes with the need to remain within planetary boundaries, but also creates the very social exclusion it is intended to cure: eroding human rights, widening the gap between the richest and the poorest, and merely modernising poverty without eliminating it'. (See too, De Schutter, Chapter 26, this volume). Similarly, Philip Alston (2020), former UN special rapporteur on poverty, calls growth a 'convenient alibi' that legitimates the enrichment of a minority at the expense of those who have little.

Fact 2: Growth impoverishes the poor

Saying that economic growth enriches the wealthy is only part of the story. The accumulation of wealth by the elites has been partly made possible by a long-running, global appropriation of human and natural resources. Eco-Marxian scholars in the tradition of the 'world-system' perspective call it 'ecologically unequal exchange' in international trade (Hornborg 1998) – a

situation where prices are systematically lower in low-income countries than in higher-income nations, resulting over time in a net appropriation of resources from poor to rich regions. Often through seemingly attractive financial arrangements, powerful nations exert economic and political pressures to keep Global South prices low so they can import cheaply. But this does not work the other way around. The goods they sell to poor countries are sold at a high price. For low-income nations, this is a twofold squeeze: under-priced exports and over-priced imports.

In 2015, according to Hickel et al. (2022a), for every unit of material that the Global South imported from the Global North, they had to export five units to pay for it (the ratio is 5:1 for land, 3:1 for energy and 13:1 for labour). This resulted in a net appropriation of 12bn tons of raw materials, 822M hectares of land, 21 exajoules of energy (equivalent to 3.4bn barrels of oil) and 188M person-years equivalent of labour (equivalent to 392bn hours of work), all in one year. In monetary terms, the Global North has appropriated US$10.8tn from the South through this logic of unequal exchange. In other words, US$10.8tn worth of commodities were transferred gratis to high-income economies instead of being used to meet domestic needs. To better grasp the order of magnitude of this figure, the authors of the study indicate that this one-year surplus alone would have been enough money to end extreme poverty 70 times over with reference to the poverty gap at US$1.90 (Hickel et al. 2022a, p. 6). The global cumulated drain between 1990 and 2015 amounts to US$242tn. Another way of looking at the same number: for every dollar of aid that rich nations give to the Global South, they appropriate resources worth US$80 through unequal exchange (Hickel et al. 2022a, p. 8).

This logic of unequal exchange is also at play when it comes to financial flows. In a recent working paper, Nievas and Sodano (2024) analyse how rates of return on foreign assets and liabilities have impacted different groups of countries since 1970. Their results show that rich countries enjoy the privilege of acting as bankers of the world, attracting excess savings by providing low-yield safe assets and channelling them towards more profitable ventures. This leads to a systemic net transfer from low-income to high-income countries – equivalent to a gain of 1 per cent of the GDP of the top richest 20 per cent nations (2% for the top 10% richest nations) and a loss amounting to 2–3 per cent of the GDP of poorer countries. This means that low-income countries dedicate 2–3 per cent of their GDP to service liabilities they have with richer nations, a monetary inflow that grows Global North GDP by 1 per cent.

To cover the interest payment on their foreign liabilities, low-income countries are compelled to generate trade surpluses, which, through the logic of unequal exchange, deprive them of more labour and natural resources than if they had self-produced these goods and services. This debt-controlled, growth-driven logic of development is a vicious circle. Financial dependency on richer foreign nations creates a need for larger volumes of exports, which weakens the capacity to satisfy local needs, therefore necessitating larger imports, which can only be paid by contracting more liabilities.

***Fact 3*: The rich destroy ecosystems**

With great wealth come great ecological footprints or, as one can read in the latest *Global Resource Outlook* (UNEP 2024a, p. 63), ‘affluence is the main global driver of environmental impacts’. Indeed, all per-capita ecological footprints considered in the report (climate impacts, particle pollution, water stress and biodiversity loss) are larger in high-income nations than in all other country categories (UNEP 2024a, p. 56).

A prime example is greenhouse gas (expressed as carbon, CO_2) emissions: the richest 10 per cent (680M people) generate 48 per cent of all emissions while the poorest half of humanity – almost 4 bn people – accounts for only 12 per cent of the global carbon footprint (Chancel et al. 2023, p. 86). Overall, the top 1 per cent richest individuals (16.8% of global emissions) emit more carbon than 66 per cent of the world's population (Khalfan et al. 2023, p. 10). The personal footprint of the top 0.1 per cent of wealthiest individuals is as high as 322t of CO_2 equivalent (Gössling and Humpe 2023, p. 3), more than 50 times higher than the world average (6t per capita). The authors estimate that, if these inequalities go unchanged, the emissions of world millionaires alone (51.9M people in 2020) will consume 72 per cent of the remaining global carbon budget by 2050. It is a solid stylised fact that the higher up the economic ladder the individual sits, the larger the carbon emissions. In 2020, production-based emissions averaged 11t per capita in high-income countries, 8t per capita in upper-middle-income countries, and 3 and 1t per capita in lower-middle-income and low-income countries, respectively (UNEP 2024a, p. 35).

These carbon inequalities are not new. Europe and North America are the source of half of cumulated emissions since 1850 (Chancel 2022). Looking at CO_2 emissions in excess of the carbon budget that would limit global warming to 1.5°C as a measure of climate breakdown, the G8 nations – representing less than 15 per cent of world population – are responsible for 85 per cent of the emission overshoot (Hickel 2020). The picture gets even more unequal when we consider that the responsibility for emissions under colonial rule is attributable to colonial rulers. For example, the proportionate French share of historical emissions rises by 51 per cent, while it increases by 70 per cent for the UK, 33 per cent for Belgium, 181 per cent for the Netherlands, and 234 per cent for Portugal (Evans and Viisainen 2023).

Similar patterns emerge when looking at resource use in general. In 2022, 7Gt of materials were extracted globally with higher-income nations accounting for 31 per cent of world material consumption (Circle Economy 2023, p. 40). In 2020, material footprints in rich countries (24t per capita) were 4.8 times the level of lower-middle-income countries and 6 times the ones of low-income countries (UNEP 2024a, p. 34). The 1bn richest individuals consume 72 per cent of global resources, while the 1.2bn poorest account for just 1 per cent. Low-income countries, on the other hand, only have a steady access to less than 3 per cent of global material extraction (IRP 2019, pp. 7–8).

Similarly to carbon emissions, the unequal split of access to materials goes back a long way. Between 1970 and 2017, nearly 2.5 of materials were extracted and used globally. Looking at cumulative material use in excess of equitable and sustainable boundaries, high-income nations are responsible for 74 per cent of global excess material use while the Global South is responsible for only 8 per cent, including low-income countries, which only caused 1 per cent of global overshoot in material use (Hickel et al. 2022b). In a country-specific empirical study looking at this unilateral appropriation of materials over the past two centuries, Magalhães et al. (2019, p. 299) call France 'one of the greatest parasites of the world-ecology'.

Moreover, levels of municipal waste per capita in Northern America are double those in Eastern Europe and South America, and more than four times the levels in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNEP 2024b, p. 16). The total volume of municipal solid waste produced in Canada and the United States (~300M t for a population of less than 400M people) is higher than the total amount of waste produced in Central and South Asia (~290M t for a population of ~2bn). Political ecologists refer to economic growth sustaining an 'imperial mode of living' (see Chapter 27, this volume) – a situation where the resource-intensive, high-impact lifestyles of a minority of rich people come to undermine the basic conditions of existence of everyone else by jeopardising the health of ecosystems.

Fact 4: Ecological wreckage harms the poor

Not only is resource use unevenly distributed (*Fact 3*) but so are its impacts. Today, it is the poorest who have to deal most directly with environmental degradation. 'The economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable' was supposedly written by Lawrence Summers in 1991, then chief economist at the World Bank. This infamous memo has become a reality. This is the 'periphery's double burden' (Saito 2024, p. 25), that low-income countries get deprived of their natural resources (*Fact 2*) but they inherit the pollution deriving from their extraction and use (*Fact 4*).

This is true for climate impacts, water stress, particulate matter pollution, and both land and marine biodiversity loss (UNEP 2024a, p. 56). Climate change is a perfect example of this asymmetry of consequences. A systematic literature review from Méjean et al. (2024) finds robust empirical evidence that the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect the poor, both globally and within countries. This takes the form of a greater exposure to flood, coastal erosion, hurricanes, diseases and pests, mudslides, drought, heatwaves, water scarcity and reduced crop yields, among other climate hazards. Chancel et al. (2023, p. 86) estimate that the bottom 50 per cent poorest people on Earth will shoulder an estimated 75 per cent of the cost of climate change, with the remaining 25 per cent split between the middle 40 per cent (22% of losses) and the upper decile who will bear only 3 per cent of climate-related losses.

Not only are disadvantaged groups more exposed, but they are also more susceptible to associated harms and have a lower ability to cope with and recover from the damage – recall from *Fact 1* that the 4bn poorest people on Earth, those most vulnerable to environmental degradation, only own 2 per cent of world wealth.

This stylised fact applies to most environmental impacts. Take biodiversity, for instance. The global assessment by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES 2019) reports that 14 out of 18 categories of ecosystem services have declined since 1970. This means less climate regulation, more acidic oceans, more floods and droughts, mass coral bleaching and depletion of fisheries, more pests and less enjoyable experiences in nature. Bastien-Olvera et al. (2024) estimate that the global flow of ecosystem benefits will be reduced by 9.2 per cent in 2100 and that the poorest 50 per cent of countries will experience 90 per cent of these damages, compared to 2 per cent for the 10 per cent wealthiest countries. This is particularly problematic since people in poverty are more directly dependent on ecosystems for their livelihoods (Suich et al. 2015).

Discussion: degrowth as a strategy for global justice

In a finite world, the too-much of a minority of affluent people quickly becomes the not-enough of everyone else down the line. In today's global economy, wealth evaporates up the ladder and pollution trickles down. The richest accumulate material privileges, while the poorest are condemned to suffer the ecological consequences. More insidiously, wealthy countries bully poor ones into becoming cheap, all-you-can-eat buffets so that the wealthy can maintain a comfortable yet unsustainable way of life (*Facts 1* and *3*) that not only deprives the Global South of access to the resources they need for their own development (*Fact 2*) but also adds the extra burden of ecological wreckage (*Fact 4*).

If these four observations and the brief analyses underscoring them are correct, they disprove the prevailing discourse of development that calls on so-called 'least developed' nations to grow out of their misery. This is not going to happen since the Global South is maintained in underdevelopment

by the overdevelopment of the Global North. 'Her wings are cut and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly', wrote Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1953). The countries aspiring to higher living standards cannot properly achieve prosperity if their resources are being captured and squandered by others. To fly, the cutting associated with sustaining hyper-consumerist ways of living must stop.

This is the idea of degrowth – a downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints, planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing well-being. Downsizing high-footprint, low-well-being activities in already-rich economies would reduce global rates of extraction and pollution for the benefit of poorer countries whose ecosystems and communities feel most of the burn. If we are talking about climate change, this means cutting luxury emissions as fast as possible to preserve as much of the carbon budget as possible for those who have used it the least and who need it the most.

This degrowth position is not to be confused with any blanket call for producing and consuming less everywhere and forever. Reductions in resource use are not applicable to the destitute who are found in both affluent and poor countries or more generally to communities where the great majority of subsistence needs are unmet. This would have little impact since, as we have seen, the ecological footprint of the poor contributes little to the bio crisis (*Fact 3*). The downsizing dimension of degrowth concerns the global affluent, those who have already acquired the material means of securing a decent life and who are over-consuming further above their fair share of planet Earth.

There are other ways to justify the deliberate slowdown of economic activities in high-income nations. For now, one should remember that however difficult degrowth might be to organise in the Global North, it remains an indispensable transition for high-ecological footprint countries who do not manage to sufficiently lower their environmental pressures. From an environmental justice perspective, degrowth is an absolute necessity if we are to secure well-being for all within planetary boundaries. What remains to be discussed further are the magnitudes of this downscaling and the details of its implementation, topics which are explored in detail throughout the rest of this handbook.

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4

CAPITALIST CRISIS AND AFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES

Marina Sitrin

We, people across the globe, are living in a heightened time of contradictions – a long historical moment where millions are further plunged into all forms of crisis, from economic, ecological and political, to racial and gendered crises. And, at the same time, we're experiencing an unprecedented moment of movement, of communities and societies in movement taking their lives into their own hands – breaking power over with power from below – and moving to the left, where the heart resides, as the Zapatistas remind us. The use of 'and' is essential here, thinking of these historical moments together, and necessarily so, rather than oppositional. Too often we think and feel in terms of binaries; it is either good or bad, a time of crisis or a time of movement, inspiring or depressing. This chapter is about the incredible forms of organisation and affective (care- and trust-based) relationships that have been emerging and deepening at the same time as the massive crisis. I invite readers to *think and feel with an 'and'* as you read and move through your day. We can feel deep inspiration in times of despair. In fact, it is only with love and inspiration that we move with and through it and create more possibilities – with, against and beyond capitalisms.

People around the globe, in disparate places, are challenging hierarchical powers, from formal institutions of power, such as nation-states, international financial institutions and corporations, to forms of institutional and relational hierarchical power, such as patriarchy and racism. To the extent that degrowth activists and the degrowth movement manifest in horizontal and affective ways, degrowth can be considered a part of this phenomenon of movements (Burkhart et al. 2020; Liegey and Nelson 2020; Nelson 2024), mobilising against the exponential drive and domineering forces for economic growth, in order to achieve just, fair and sustainable relations with Earth and one another.

The forms of challenges that such movements take often refuse hierarchical power, and at the same time develop grounded alternatives – creating the desired relationship in the refusal. Works by John Holloway, particularly *Change the World without Taking Power* (Holloway 2002), have profoundly influenced the degrowth movement, especially in France (Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. 89–90). The challenge to power is increasingly not manifest as a demand on the state or any institution aside from, perhaps, the demand to withdraw whatever that institution is doing – the challenge is in practising the alternatives (prefiguration). The focus on goals without demands is sometimes ideological, though most often it is as an instinct for survival. As John Holloway (2010, p. 17) writes, 'The cracks begin with a No, from which there grows a dignity'. Those institutions

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in place, whether by choice or lack of capacity and ability, are not meeting people's needs and, thus, people are increasingly coming together, looking to one another to resolve what challenges we have, and to create solutions and alternatives.

This phenomenon has been developing over the past 20 years, reflected in horizontal, autonomous and affective forms of organising, with millions striving to prefigure a new society in the shell of the old. Many prefigurative movements described here to give a better sense of this global rise often do not come from people organising with a plan to change society or even people who have been involved in political organising but arise from necessity. And that need is satisfied in the most useful, and most empowering and enjoyable, way of organising – horizontally, sharing power and creating space for equal participation and mutual care. This chapter, which intends to give a politico-cultural milieux for the rise of degrowth, as outlined in these pages, as a horizontalist movement, offers a mere glimpse of thousands of examples around the world, small and large, from community-based and locally based to the self-organisation of massive territories. I chose to focus on some of the larger and more widespread movements and territories, such as the Zapatistas and Rojava, as well as the Movements of the Squares, Argentina in the post-2001 crisis, Greece's violent austerity packages imposed after 2008 economic crisis, and the mutual aid networks that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many more examples that could be discussed but, for sake of space cannot – movements such as the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) in Oaxaca (Mexico) in 2006; current autonomous territories of Cherán and Guerrero (Mexico); Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) Shack Dwellers Movement (South Africa); and others taking land and housing, such as Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) (the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil); the Regantes in Bolivia self-organising their water collection and distribution; and the many thousands of spaces around the globe where self-organising is a process for defending land. Many degrowth activists have drawn inspiration from, and organised with and alongside such movements using horizontalist practices and occupation as a strategy, for example in the ZAD (zone to defend) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes (France) (Pailloux 2015). 'By restoring the commons dismantled by capitalism', writes Kohei Saito (2024, p. 236), 'degrowth communism has the potential to make a richer, more human way of living possible again'.

People facilitating and leading these movements from below are most often women and people who do not identify with a political party or even political position or ideology. Often not seeing themselves as social movements per say, these groupings and communities comprise what has been referred to as 'societies and pueblos in movement' by Raul Zibechi (2024). I will continue to use this conceptual holder for what is taking place, over social movements, as it explains better the process of organising together *with objectives*, but without a focus on demands on the state or institutions to do it for people, as the concepts of social movements implicitly do. We are on the move globally, resisting and creating alternatives that are grounded in solidarity, trust and care.

In a break from conventionally understood forms of organising and movements, since around 1989 – with the fall of the Berlin Wall and with it a specific vision of socialism and social change losing ground – forms of change, and understandings of the location of change, have been shifting. Something new is happening – something new in content, depth, breadth and global consistency. Societies around the world are in movement. I will describe a few examples of such movements, beginning with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994, then the popular rebellion in Argentina in 2001, on to the Movement of the Squares beginning in 2011, the Rojava revolution in 2013 and, finally, the mutual aid networks that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in 2020. Following these descriptions I identify a number of thematic areas that each of these examples

have in common, reflecting this growing new phenomenon from horizontalism, with a centring of face-to-face directly democratic relationships, to the focus on self-organisation and a grounding in affect with an overarching sense of prefiguration. In short, rather than focus on familiar mainstream party and policy-oriented politics, I describe a few of the currents within which degrowth has emerged as a movement, its 21st-century political milieu.

Since the content of this short chapter is overwhelmingly explanatory of the liberatory forces and affective processes common to autonomous movements influencing degrowth activism, I refrain from analysing concepts of movement success and failure, and the multiple reasons for what is often perceived as retreats or being forced underground. This is a huge topic that requires detailed analysis and engagement with movement participants around the globe to even begin a serious discussion. Very briefly, sometimes internal conflicts drain energy and distract from a movement's focus on autonomous creation. Other times the impact of the constellations of forces which conspire to exhaust and disappoint prefigurative experimenters is too much to bear. But there's no space to analyse these complex and manifold challenges here. Reasons common to all struggles are threats and realities of state violence and international financial institutions that protect market forces in their expansive efforts of exploitation and exclusion – exploitation and exclusion that destroys Earth, the infrastructure of resistance, and resisters. Even though all autonomous movements must attend in varying extents to oppositional violence and material frustrations, instead of focusing and strategising on physical resistance, they focus and strategising around creations of new worlds – as I do here.

Zapatistas: Chiapas (Mexico)

'Ya Basta!' ('Enough!') was shouted on the infamous 1 January 1994 when the Zapatistas in the Southeast of Mexico appeared to the world, refusing to disappear and rejecting 500 years of domination. They not only shouted 'Ya Basta!', they simultaneously took over seven towns, many thousands of acres of land that had been stolen from them and used the time in the City Hall of San Cristobal de Las Casas to destroy the fabricated property titles to much of the land in the region. The taking back of land was an integral part of the refusal of a history of repression and domination. In the rejection of a past and present of domination was an opening, an affirmation, as they say – one no and many yeses.

Easily the most contemporarily referenced autonomous movement in the world, both because of how they organise and the poetry they use to describe these visions and desires, the Zapatistas opened a collective imagination for radicals looking beyond the state and political parties to what is possible, leading from below and to the left. The uprising of the Zapatistas who 'have said that they want to make the world anew, to create a world of dignity, a world of humanity, but without taking power' have strongly impressed Holloway (2002, p. 20, 2019, pp. x–xvi). Similarly, this movement has influenced degrowth impulses for decolonising and deterritorialising, collective sufficiency, autonomy and commoning (Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019).

The Zapatistas now control approximately the northeast half of Chiapas, Mexico. This territory is divided into five regions, called Caracoles. Within each Caracol are several municipalities, the number varying in each. Each municipality has its own autonomous governance, the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (as opposed to the Mal Gobierno of the State). These are directly democratic consensus-based forms of governance, which developed up to 2023 with a focus on the autonomous projects in each region, from the schools, health clinics and cooperative work on the land to the women's groups (Klein 2015).

This regional autonomy and self-governance is precisely what the Zapatistas prepared for over a decade before they came out to the world. In contrast to the myth that they just appeared out of the jungle, they are clear that this emergence was growing for decades beforehand. Their emergence was not a declaration of war, as was often written by mainstream journalists, but an invitation to new social creation by way of self-defence. This concept of invitation is something one hears echoed in the voices of movement protagonists ever since. The Zapatistas made radio announcements for days after arriving in San Cristobal inviting people over Mexico to do the same. Not as a declaration to join them but an invitation to self-organise their own refusals and creations in each of their specific locations. To open their own crack in history – as they also say – referring to this breaking open of new ways of being while still in the midst of capitalism and repression. They did not and do not demand that the state recognise them as an autonomous authority – they exist as they are and know who they are. They do not accept aid from local or national government(s) but instead create their own means of survival. And, while not without challenges –particularly with regard to the increased aggression and direct attacks by paramilitary forces, it continues with a new affective dignity.

Argentina: *Que se vayan todos*

On 19 and 20 December 2001 an economic crisis, precipitated by years of unprecedented privatisation, came to a head. The spark that broke a long period of relative silence in the population was lit when the Argentine government froze people's bank accounts, one of a long series of escalating acts in the name of the economy. In response, first one person and then another, then hundreds, thousands and hundreds of thousands went into the streets. People were not organised by any political party, union or formal grouping. They merely saw their neighbourhoods out in the streets, banging on pots and pans (*cacerolando*). People moved together and began to sing, not a specific chat around a policy but a song that was a total break with all that had been – they sang 'QSVY' – *Que no quede ni uno solo* (They all must go – not one should remain!). And they sang it again and again, day after day and night after night. The first two days, what are known as 'the 19th and 20th', are seen as a breaking point in the history of Argentina. In the subsequent days, people in the streets forced out four consecutive governments.

Rather than forming political parties or trying to take over the now totally delegitimised state, people came together and formed assemblies in their neighbourhoods, took over workplaces, and those unemployed neighbourhoods that were organised exploded with more people and projects – along with new movements emerging in the neighbourhoods, from media and art collectives to popular kitchens.

While many of the movements have shrunk numerically over the years, the forms of organising inspired in the wake of the popular rebellion continue. Many now refer to themselves as *Hijos* (children) of the 19 and 20, meaning that they organise in non-hierarchical ways, seeking *horizontalidad* and autonomy from the state and formal/traditional institutions of power, as was exemplified in the days and months after the popular rebellion. This is seen most especially with the movements in defence of Earth, from those resisting mines and deforestation in the north to assemblies preventing Monsanto from constructing a seed processing plant near Cordoba, to women and mothers fighting the contamination of their water and land. It is seen in the continued recuperation of workplaces (as discussed later in reference to self-organisation) and in the women's movement in defence of life. *Horizontalidad* forms continue and are almost instinctive, as many say the state is not the forum from which to make change – change must be made from below, horizontally.

Real democracy movements

'Everywhere is Taksim! Everywhere is resistance!' and 'Come, come whoever you are!' read some of the main slogans in the early days of the movement in Turkey. In Brazil, only weeks later, hundreds of thousands began mobilising throughout the country, many chanting, 'No party represents me!' From these mass mobilisations, people also began to gather in city neighbourhoods and towns, forming horizontal assemblies, discussing both what was wrong in society and what they could do about it. In Bosnia and Portugal before them, the slogans were 'They can't represent us'. In Moscow they added on 'They can't even imagine us'. Throughout the United States (US) it was, 'We are the 99%' and in Spain – the first movement following those in Egypt and Tunisia 'Ya basta! Together with real democracy now!'

As the declarations were made, people came together in assemblies, taking over squares, plazas and public spaces to face each other and create something else – real democracy. None were traditional social movements that have 'claims' and 'demands' that, once met, placate the movement. These are movements about reclaiming relationships to one another, reclaiming space and reinventing ways of being. No one demand can answer the mobilisations; it is not for 'rights' as much as for new ways of conceiving society. And with these new relationships is a new sense of time, as a song that emerged in the early days in Turkey sings – with a musical backdrop of spoons tapping glasses and pots (as with the *cacerolazo* in Argentina in 2001) – 'come, come, slowly slowly, the ground is still wet'. Also reminding us of one of the Zapatistas speaking of 'walking we ask questions, and we walk slow since we are going far'.

Movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the US, the 15M in Spain, the Plenums in Bosnia, the assemblies in Gezi Park in Turkey, Syntagma Square in Greece, 132 in Mexico, and from 2011 through 2012 thousands more followed globally with movements such as Nuit Debout in France in 2016. In the decade before the 2011–2012 Real Democracy movements there had been other similar movements, massive in number and diverse in geography, also grounded in assemblies, taking over and using space and focusing on direct democracy, direct action and prefiguration – movements already mentioned such as APPO in Mexico (2006), and the Global Justice Movement (GJM) most prominent in1999–2005, located in diverse cities and towns around the world. I am averse to giving such movements a name, not wanting to lump them under the same umbrella, yet, they have so much in common that it is important and useful to think of them together.

The overarching arguments and descriptions involve the focus on social relationships, real democracy and the moments in the squares and, thus, cover Egypt, Tunisia, Iceland, Portugal, Brazil, Hong Kong, Moscow, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Slovenia, Germany and France, as well as youth- and student-based movements in Chile, Canada, Italy and Mexico. These movements arise, decline and regrow in the face of significant challenges by states in the form of violence, from mainstream media in terms of distortion, and market forces supporting the political status quo. Many distinctions exist, some quite significant, specifically on the question of the relationship to the state, demands and directions the movements took after the squares. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus is what they hold in common, the organising that took place mostly at the time of the occupations or soon thereafter, and the centrality of social relationships.

COVID-19 mutual aid networks

To write or talk about the historical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic is to hold a lot of things together at once. A constant overarching fear that has been collective and a fear that many people had not previously experienced collectively at this level. While we had all been in the same terrible

storm that was COVID-19, we were not all in the same boat. Structural *inequality* is revealed in even more intensity than usual during crises and disasters. This one revealed all the ugliness and systemic oppressions and inequalities most of our societies have been built upon – that privilege the very few, and try and pit the rest of us against one another – locally, regionally and globally.

And, as the crisis deepened and revealed all that is oppressive and intentionally divisive in the forms of systems we live under, it also opened a new space. The crisis and inability of governments to meet people's needs during the pandemic created a vacuum that people not only have been filling but also going beyond. In towns, cities and villages all over the world people began – and, in places, continue – to reach out and help one another, going door to door, with friendship and neighbourhood groups, to networks and larger evolving networks of networks. People have been striving to meet people's daily survival needs, including social and emotional needs, finding ways to get food and medicine to people, and helping to break solitude, find connections and create new ways of relating.

It is unclear how many millions of people are and have been involved in these various networks globally, but it is important that we hold the sheer number of people in our minds when thinking about how we might restructure society. How many people are ready to self-organise around fulfilling basic needs beyond the current institutions and structures that we have, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the US and other such disaster agencies? When I co-edited a book on pandemic solidarity with over a dozen, mostly women, from around the world, we did not begin the project as co-editors (Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar 2020). But we found, in the process of working together, that it was not 'my' book but rather a collective story, vision and collaboration. This was not dissimilar from the networks and groups whose voices we were striving to facilitate.

In a matter of a few months, a handful of people reached out to another handful of friends and political collaborators, from various parts of the globe, and we put together a book of stories of solidarity and mutual aid in these pandemic times. It is important to note that I, and we, did not make a list of places around the world where we thought there would be expressions of solidarity but rather we used our networks and found that everywhere, from Brazil and Argentina to Taiwan and South Korea, from Southern Africa and Italy to Northern Iraq and Rojava, people were self-organising, and doing so in horizontal and affective ways.

We found that it was almost always women leading and facilitating these processes, even if they were not always the ones to step forward first for an interview. The interviews from around the globe reflect common forms of organisation, consistent with the newer prefigurative societies in movement, characterised by affect, changing social relationships, anti-capitalist and/or institutional powers, and horizontalism.

The description that Eleanor, a creative activist, organiser, and journalist, shares in an interview done with carla bergman in the Turtle Island chapter of *Pandemic Solidarity* is consistent with others all around the globe. In this case a mutual aid network was formed by the coming together of other networks and groups, although in many places the networks emerged via social media calls to come together, or flyers on street posts, or groups of friends inviting others, and of course, teachers. Eleanor (cited in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar 2020, p. 222) explains:

> DC [District of Columbia] Mutual Aid is a women of color led effort that grew out of existing networks of mutual aid and grassroots organizing to respond to the pandemic. We've set up a hotline to take requests from community members, a place to sanitize and pack goods and then deliver those to our neighbors. DC Mutual Aid is split up by wards and while each ward's workflow is autonomous, we're all part of the same city that is uniquely DC. We're scrappy and underfunded but like all mutual aid efforts, we roll with what comes. As my

> friend Maurice Cook puts it, "when the systems fail, the people show up." And people really have shown up – proving in spotlit contrast the uselessness of the state. We're constantly changing our protocols, for instance setting up emergency delivery protocols to address dire needs between scheduled delivery days, working to get folks fresh food by building relationships with local, small scale farmers who have been hit hard by the downturn in farmers' market access and restaurant purchases.

Such mutual aid movements have a great deal of overlap with the new municipalist initiatives and movement made visible with the Barcelona Fearless Cities summit in mid-2017 (Russell 2019), along with their strategic local and international alliances, and open (re)localisation as promoted by degrowth (Savini, Chapter 32, this volume).

Rojava

Nourshan (cited in Sitrin 2025, forthcoming), from the Civil Diplomacy Center in Rojava, explained to me and others throughout our time together in the summer of 2024 how the free society of Rojava is organised, and why:

> [I]n our region Rojava, in North-East Syria, is 5 million people that live together with our various multicultural and national backgrounds. We are Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, Syriacs, Turkmens, living each other in the colorful life and coexistence. We have an autonomous administration with our own councils, our own communes.

From 2013, the territory has been made up of three Cantons and numerous affiliated autonomous communities, each with local autonomy but connected within the overall system of municipal governance. Rojava, not dissimilar from the Zapatistas relationship to the state of Mexico, as a de facto autonomous region in NE Syria has within its governing documents the right to self-govern.

The democratic form of organisation that the Cantons take is a combination of direct democracy, democratic confederalism and constantly changing interconnections between all the decision-making groups from below. With the exception of some defence decisions, almost everything is decided through assemblies and other directly democratic processes. Workplaces decide issues related to work, together with their district and regional councils, with agriculture similarly organised. At the smallest level, there are anywhere from a few dozen to a few hundred families involved in street assemblies. Each of the street assemblies has a male and female coordinator, not leaders in a hierarchical sense but spokespeople who take ideas to and from the assembly at the district level. Again, at the district level, there is a similar assembly form with spokespeople. Political parties, social movements and groups, and the women's commission all participate with gender parity. If there is not gender parity, it is not considered democratic and thus not recognised. In addition, only women elect the women spokespeople, while both men and women elect the man. Each commission must be at least 40 per cent men and 40 per cent women – excepting, of course, the women's commission and the women's organisations that deal with specific accusations of gender-based crime, which are only composed of women.

Other forms of democracy

Newer movements have several characteristics in common, focusing on the importance of facing one another and not looking to the state in the creation of directly democratic processes; the

use of self-organisation and autonomy over, say demands for reforms; a grounding in horizontal social relationships; and the centrality of affect in all of these relationships. The beginning point for so many of the movements is a rejection of the 'crisis', which is described differently and yet has similar roots. And, consistent among all of them is the manifestation of another practice of democracy – direct and participatory.

The development of, and desire for, new forms of democracy is reflected in slogans that have evolved around the world, and subsequent formations of directly democratic assemblies. 'Another world is possible' became an informal slogan of many in the GJM in the late 1990s to early 2000s, together with '*Un altro modo é possible*' ('Another way is possible') in Italy in 2001. Later, in Oaxaca in 2005 and 2006, the APPO began with *Ya Basta*! which quickly evolved into 'an alternative democracy to establish a new social pact – a new form of government' and later, in 2011, to '*No nos representan*' ('You don't represent us') in Spain, Russia and Brazil. The same themes were iterated in Occupy movements – 'We are the 99%' in the US (2011), 'Dear our government . . . get lost!' in Tunisia, '*Democracia real ya*! ('Real democracy, Yes!') in Spain, 'You can't even imagine us' in Moscow, and 'The people must rule' in Portugal. Of course, we must add the poetic contribution of the Zapatistas since 1994, helping us to think both in terms of questions – 'walking while we question' and of a 'world in which many worlds fit'.

With the exception of military strategies and security, in Rojava and Zapatista territories all decisions are made in assemblies, meaning with people facing one another, listening and exchanging, so as to move together, even if with disagreement. With the exception of the mutual aid networks during the COVID-19 pandemic, all movements discussed here, and so many more around the globe since the late 1990s, insist on an assembly form of decision-making. This is inextricably connected to what is being created and striven for affective, self-organised, autonomous projects and visions. Whether in defence of housing, protecting the land from fracking or mining, recuperating work or women coming together to discuss how to protect their bodies and life. The process is almost always the same.

Horizontal relationships

The language of horizontalism began to be used sometime during the rise of the GJM, first as a descriptor and then, so as to distinguish the new social relationship forms from the 'Verticals', meaning those who organised with hierarchy and often coming from, and with a desire for, a political party. Over time, this loose description became much more widely used, based on the experiences and articulations in Argentina. It took off as a way of describing more than just new relationships. Horizontal took on a sense of future aspiration together with a sense of evolving and changing relationships.

Horizontalidad was first used to describe the relationships that emerged in Argentina after the 2001 economic crisis. Similar to Movements of the Squares and APPO, in Argentina hundreds of thousands of people went into the streets, without political parties or unions leading them, and formed assemblies. *Horizontalidad* became one of the main ways people described what they were doing, how they were doing it, and how they wanted to be together. *Horizontalidad* is a social relationship that implies, as its name suggests, a flat plane upon which to communicate.

Horizontalidad necessarily implies the use of direct democracy and the striving for consensus, processes in which attempts are made for everyone to be heard and, thus, new relationships are created. This form of relating is not an end but a tool to help facilitate new relationships, ones grounded in trust, sharing and open communication – an issue that sometimes arose as some movement participants saw the use of a form of consensus, such as in Spain or the US, as the end

rather than means to help in the striving for horizontalism. In these cases, and as sometimes is done by people writing about movements, horizontalism is characterised as an 'ism', a political program or totality, rather than a relationship and a tool. This mis-characterisation entirely misses the point of what people in movement have been doing, which is to strive for a dynamic and ever-changing democratic form that empowers people's sense of self and relationship to one another. The specific democratic form that relationship takes is determined by those people involved. It was a form of consensus in Occupy Wall Street; in Greece, a vastly different form of direct democracy, sometimes using a lottery form to select speakers; and in Argentina it varied from assembly to assembly. The goal is that horizontalism is a tool, not an end.

As described by Emilio (cited in Sitrin 2022) with respect to a network of land defenders in northern Argentina – in a conversation that we had in 2014:

> The Union of Citizens Assemblies emphatically organizes with *horizontalidad* and with absolute independence from NGOs, political parties and the state. We use direct action and self-organize autonomously.

And then, outside of Cordoba, Argentina, later that year, Vanessa (cited in Sitrin 2015) described how they organised to defeat what would have been the largest genetically modified seed processing plant in the world:

> Our resistance began in 2012 when a group of neighbours came together. . . . Within two weeks we organized 'The Assembly of Malvinas', made up of neighbours – almost none of us had any organizing experience from before. We organised in a horizontal way, didn't have any leader and made all decisions together.

From the Lanzarote Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform Against the Mortgage Crisis in Spain) (PAH) – a movement against evictions and for housing, which became much broader and deeper with the 15M of Spain, Cristina (cited in Sitrin 2014a) explained:

> There are no hierarchies. They don't exist. But it is not that they don't exist because someone suggested it, but because it is a space where each person becomes the owner of their life and everyone has every opportunity. If we are all in control of our lives and we have all the opportunities there is no desire for someone to come and tell you what to do. The objective is that you have all the tools, all the capacity and opportunity to seek freedom and the freedom of all – so of course, hierarchy does not fit, and we don't feel it, want it ever.

In the chapter on Turtle Island in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar (2020), co-author carla bergman spoke with Klee Benally (Diné/Navajo, a volunteer with Táala Hooghan Infoshop and Kinlani/Flagstaff Mutual Aid, as well as a writer, musician and filmmaker). In their conversation, Klee makes clear the break from capitalist relations in their organising, as well as visioning beyond forms of power and exploitation endemic to capitalism. He points to the historical as well as current rejection of these forms of relating, highlighting care and shared power – going beyond capitalism in practice and theory – a theory based practice. To begin, Klee (cited in Sitrin and Sembrar 2020, pp. 214–5) describes how these practices are not new:

> The idea of collective care and support, of ensuring the well-being of all our relations in non-hierarchical voluntary association, and taking direct action has always been something

> that translated easily for me. That's how I was raised. *T'áá hwó' ají t'éego* means if it is going to be, it is up to you. No one will do it for you. We also have a Diné philosophy rooted in Ké', or our familial relations, which means that no one would ever be left to fend for themselves, we are all relatives in some way so we have to care for each other. We built these understandings into Táala Hooghan Infoshop from the beginning . . .
>
> We're organizing with the vision that these efforts have the power to make capitalism and colonialism irrelevant. We are actively establishing interventions to ensure that these systems don't recuperate. To that end we've established an Indigenous Mutual Aid network to build connections through and beyond this crisis.

Self-organisation: autogestion

What is 'self-organisation'? In a conversation I had with Ilektra Bethymouti, a Greek psychologist who organises with the Social Solidarity Clinics, Bethymouti (cited in Sitrin 2014b) encapsulates the intentions and processes of self-organisation:

> We believe in and want self-organization because what we are achieving with self-organization is something more than giving a service, what we are organizing amongst ourselves is something new. We self-organize the Solidarity Clinics with horizontal assemblies – assemblies take place in each specialization, within the entire clinic and then nationally. This is a new experience and we want to continue with it.
>
> What self-organization gives us is the opportunity to achieve what we call a different health care, a different sort of health and that is what we have achieved up until now. For example in our clinic we have a group for alternative health care and we are trying to change the relationship between medical expert and those who don't know their rights or have the same expertise. We are trying to change these sorts of relationships and are doing so in ways that are very concrete. That is to say we are finding ways together with self-organization and this changes the idea of expert, of health care, of how we organize amongst doctors and with pharmaceuticals. And we have so many more questions that we have not answered yet, but we want to work on them together and can. This is much different than if you have a public health care system only with its pros and cons.

Together with, not looking to, institutions of power to resolve the many crises we face, people are finding ways to *do it themselves*. In the case of Greece, in 2011 the government began charging money for every visit to a clinic and for other services. In the midst of the economic crisis, this was not acceptable, and movements and neighbourhood assemblies organised a variety of ways to make healthcare accessible. One of which was people in neighbourhoods coming together with medical professionals and opening free and open-access clinics. Many of these clinics are still functioning at the time of writing (in 2024).

A similar way of organising to take back and self-organise one's life has come to be referred to as 'recuperation' – referring to the recuperation of life and work. In a few places in Europe in the 2010s, following the lead of Argentina, workers began to recuperate their livelihoods, together with the support of the communities around them. After the 2001 economic collapse in Argentina, and as a part of the massive wave of horizontally based movements, thousands of workers in over 350 workplaces occupied their places of work, and then collectively began to run them, based in assemblies and an equal division of work and renumeration.

I have visited a number of recuperated workplaces in Europe and have spent time in many of the workplaces in Argentina over the course of the past 20 years. The stories of these initiatives are

all quite similar, as are the feelings of power and dignity that emanate from each and every one. A few of the most emblematic of the recent European recuperations include Vio.Me in Greece, Ri-Maflow and Officine Zero in Italy, as well as Fralib and La Fabrique du Sud in France.

The difference between a traditional workplace occupation and a recuperation is generally that an occupation comes together with a list of demands on the owners, for things like back pay or a reopening of the workplace. In a recuperation, by contrast, the workers first occupy and then, following the lead of the MST, they 'Occupy, Resist, Produce' – a phrase that has now come to represent both movements in the southern cone.

To *recuperate* is to take back and put into production a workplace that is seen as collectively already yours. The need to resist is self-evident, as recuperations almost always face repression from former owners and the government. And in all cases, there is a massive turnout of people in the community, both in the political community and in the surrounding neighbourhoods, where people tend to be very understanding of the implications of unemployment and often personally know the workers involved.

It is this community, made up of neighbours and the wider society, that comes together with the workers to defend the workplace from attempted evictions. I have heard story upon story of such people who had never thought of themselves as political, or who faced off with police coming out to defend workers who wanted to run their workplaces themselves.

Each community, movement and territory has very different levels and scales of self-organisation, from encampments and blockades in defence of the earth organising to meet day-to-day needs such as food, housing supplies, and legal support, to Rojava and the Zapatista territories self-organising the entire society and economy. Emre (cited in Sitrin 2019a), a Kurdish scholar and activist who spent time in Rojava reflects:

> I witnessed assemblies in both rural villages and city neighborhoods. There are thousands of village communes across Rojava, and the members of these communes meet regularly to make collective decisions on the day-to-day running of their environments. For example, I visited the village of Carudi, near the town of Derik in northeastern Syria in early August, 2019, and participated in a village commune meeting there. The meeting took place in a garden called Şehid Kani (Martyr Kani), a garden collectively owned and maintained by the entire village. Households take turns taking care of the garden and growing vegetables there, and the proceeds from the sales of these vegetables are used for the construction of a small arts and culture center for the young members of the village.

Affective bases for alternative creations

Social movement theorists and activists speak of the political and economic motivations for movement participation, and even negative emotions such as anger and rage, but of positive feelings such as care, trust and love there is largely silence. The importance of social relationships once in movement has been increasingly discussed over the past decades, but many still shy away from the topics of love, care and support. This misses so much of what is taking place, as most people reading this are well aware, from our own experiences to conversations with others as to why and how they first got involved in organising, and why one continues.

Most of all, people who have been involved in a movement talk about how they feel – how, since being involved in whatever struggle, one feels different, better, more confident and overall happier. These positive feelings are often facilitated by a focus on social relationships – opening a space for self and group reflection. As Ayelen (cited in Sitrin and Azzellini 2013, p. 135) from the

15M in Madrid reflected in 2012, 'A compañero said to me that it was like a bundle of emotions. We all felt a tremendous sense of love'. Also from the 15M in Madrid, Luis (cited in Sitrin and Azzellini 2013, p. 141) stated:

> One of the things that most impressed me about 15-M was how people took care of each other, it was a policy of taking care, because if not, it wouldn't make sense. It was to say and show that we are not just talking about ideas, but taking into account feelings, affections and relationships.

One area that almost all movement participants I have spoken to in various parts of the world – from Europe and the US to Africa, Latin America and Asia – reflected upon was how they feel different now, with more confidence in and more affection for others, since being a part of the movement. Feelings are often relegated to the areas of culture or gender studies. I would argue – as I believe almost all of the many thousands of people with whom I have spoken over the past 25 years of movement research would argue – that affection, care and trust are central to the newer movements' success, as seen through the lens of dignity. As Kathy and Milagros (cited in Sitrin 2014b) from the PAH in Lanzarote reflect, care is at the heart of their participation and transformation:

Kathy: And now I am so much more conscious of the problems people have – that I have – and I feel so much stronger – it gives you so much more strength, and that we are so many, well it lifts you up – so much more than a person alone (tears again) – I have a lot of feelings.

Milagros: I feel, like the majority of the people participating in the PAH, that we don't have fear – and that is fundamental.

In the discussion of mutual aid networks during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey, Seyma Özdemir facilitated an interview responded to collectively, as a network already reflecting on practices of non-hierarchical organising and shared leadership. The reflections of Kadıköy Solidarity Network (Istanbul) cited in Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar (2020, p. 28), speak to changing subjectivities that arise in horizontal networks of solidarity and mutual aid as a clear break from relations that the state and institutions of power facilitate:

> Solidarity makes people feel incredible emotions nowadays. My phone number is one of the contact numbers on posters. We hear this sentence many, many times: 'You reminded us that we are human beings!' I heard this both from those who have resources to share and those who are in need. This is so real! Solidarity makes us human beings indeed! People calling me, especially the ones 80–90 years old, tell me that they would like to see my face when these days are over, and meet over a coffee. Yes, I reply, 'We will definitely meet one day.' . . . The system, the state that you pay taxes to wants to get rid of you, leave you to death. . . . However, there are others who care about you, who stick by you in solidarity without any expectation. Then you start feeling like a society. . . . You start realizing that you are in the same boat, whether young or old, employed or unemployed, health worker, baker, as ones who have been left to their own destiny. You realize that you are stronger together and you must act collectively!

And in Rojava, I interviewed Debbie Bookchin, scholar and journalist, about her experiences there. We had both observed something similar, me with the young women in the Zapatista territories

and she in Rojava – we could feel the creation of a new generation, a new way of being and a new dignity, and how so much of it was felt, and seen through the affective relationships. As Bookchin (cited in Sitrin 2019b) shared:

> People I met throughout Rojava used the word "*heval*" to address each other. *Heval* means friend first and foremost and it also means comrade. This reminded me of Spain, during the revolution of 1936, and how the formal titles that people held fell away because everyone became a "*compañero*" or "*compañera*" – a comrade, but also a companion. In Rojava the word *heval* plays a similar role, and there is something really lovely about it; you are a friend, you are a comrade and you are a co-worker because you are all in the struggle together. And this, in turn, results in "hevaltî," which traditionally means friendship, but in Rojava comes to embody something more: a mindset of collectivity, of shared purpose.
>
> There is a strong sense of care in Rojava, which is promoted quite powerfully through the women's movement. The women's movement permeates every aspect of life, and in many ways that was one of the things that surprised me the most.

Conclusion

Newer movements, of which degrowth – in as much as it adopts more horizontal and autonomous practices – is just one, are often described as prefigurative. Such newer movements are transforming the world and are focusing both on the long term and on attempting to model, prefigure, this future in the present. They are not looking to the state or any political party as their desired end. They do not look to one leader but make space for all to be leaders, sometimes using the language of leaderful. They place more importance on asking the right questions than on providing the correct answers. They resolutely reject dogma and hierarchy in favour of direct democracy and consensus. In the process they create themselves anew and reflect on this changed subjectivity. Taken together, their ideas of justice and freedom change as they change and, thus, the movements are theoretically constantly moving, changing and evolving, conceptually and subjectively. Thus, the focus is on relationality.

These societies in movement are in many regions and states throughout the world. There are working-class people recuperating workplaces; middle-class urban dwellers, many recently declassed, organising in assemblies; and the unemployed, like so many facing the prospect of never encountering regular work, self-organising, taking over land, and creating micro projects; and entire autonomous zones and towns, commoning as they defend and create commons. And, as people come together in the various moments of crisis, they organise in horizontal and affective ways to survive and recreate relations in the process. Significant is not only what these societies in movement are doing – but how it is being done with a new-found agency, one grounded in community and the society as a whole, as well as horizontally.

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PART II

Degrowth

Origins and steppingstones

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5

THE FRENCH ORIGINS AND PILLARS OF DEGROWTH

François Jarrige and Vincent Liegey

To explore the origins and rise of the idea of *décroissance* in France is difficult, as it is so deeply rooted in a series of complex temporal layers, and a plurality of possible genealogies, from its pre-history to the most recent times. *Décroissance* is part of both the long history of debates on the industrialisation of the world and its impacts, and the shorter history of political ecology over the last half-century. For a long time, the very idea of economic growth had little meaning. Growth initially referred, in French, to the increase in size of living beings, before the term was taken up metaphorically by economic theory and public policy in the second half of the 20th century.

Until the 19th century, societies generally lived in a relatively stable world, managing shortages and limited resources through the coexistence of more or less autarkic micro-communities – even though long-distance trade appeared very early on and monetisation spread into certain territories. Classical political economy, which emerged at the turn of the 19th century, reduced representations of nature to the role of capital to be exploited. For the French economist Jean-Baptiste Say, for example, natural resources were 'free gifts' made available to humans to enable their economic development. From then on a continuous process of exploitation of natural entities began in the name of 'progress' or 'growth', which had become the condition for supposed 'emancipation'.

The increase in the extraction of materials – coal, oil, a host of minerals, and exploitation of agricultural resources and livestock – have gradually taken off, as a result of a continuous growth in production that is now reaching a series of limits and contradictions, forcing us to deeply rethink the growth model that has underpinned the functioning of Western economies and their imaginaries for the last 150 years.

Roots and presage of degrowth

The quest for simplicity and moderation (*sobriété*), the control of flows of goods, and the restriction of needs that we find nowadays within degrowth debates is not an intellectual innovation. It has been the daily reality of generations of people in Europe, and in particular France, where fossil

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energy resources were not abundant and expensive. Contrary to England, and later Germany after 1860, fossil fuels had to be imported from far away (Magalhães et al. 2019). Moderation, frugality and temperance were obvious considering strong material and ecological constraints. Populations had to manage scarcities and organise the sharing of basic resources for their basic needs such as housing, heating, food, transport, health, basic tools and clothes. Historians and ethnologists have documented a lot of examples of collective management of such constrained and limited materials based on self- or socially imposed limitations of needs and consumption.

In France, as in the other societies experimenting with industrial revolutions, many observers expressed their concerns and scepticism of this political project of material abundance and infinite expansion of production. For example, Charles Fourier and his phalanstery model, around 1830, proposed a system whereby machine usage would be limited to strict necessity and where production should be higher than the fulfilment of basic needs for all. Fourier questioned the quality of mass production, useless overproduction, and the misery caused by over-abundance. He was seeking a balance between passion and the economism that he strongly disputed (Audier 2017; Scherer 2001; Jonsson and Wennerlind 2024).

In the middle of the 19th century, observing the increases in production and growth in inequalities, several authors expressed their doubts about the benefits of consumerism. For example, the woodworker Louis-Gabriel Gauny, whose writings were exhumed by philosopher Jacques Rancière (1983) in the 1970s, exemplifies early critics of the infinite expansion of the economic sphere. Born in Paris in 1806, Gauny, a poet and philosopher, also practised several manual occupations. He represented a society of educated workers looking to reconcile manual and intellectual work while opposing the artificial promises of bourgeois and industrial modernity. Gauny (in Rancière 1983, p. 62) denounced the exploitation of animals and the excesses of the consumption of rare resources warning, for example, against:

> the railways [which] clear the forests, exhaust the coal mines, steal land from agriculture, break up the roads, tear up the hills, atrophy man under his stifling regime and make the world a pigeonhole of silent pain for the benefit of more active circulation. By ravaging the soul they also ravage the nature of things by the monotony of their celerity and the turbulence of their system. . . . Coal, this flood fuel, which no power of life renews, is devoured by the conflagration of locomotives with a frightful frenzy for our future needs.

Conversely, Gauny defends what he calls a 'cenobitic economy' – an economy of moderation and fair measures opposed to the industrialism promoted at the time by liberal economists and certain socialist groups. Rancière (198) continues to quote from Gauny's unpublished manuscript. 'A need for less is a strength for more', we read at the top of his text – 'Let's live a little, it's a great means of defense'. He theorises restriction as consumption begins to expand, he reflects on the question of needs and defends a 'regime of general sobriety'. For him, 'moderation is far from lending a hand to the tyrant by being able to subject the worker to low wages'. On the contrary, 'moderation elevates man by forcing him to seek immaterial agitations'.

Many reformers and early socialist thinkers questioned the principle of permanent and continuous expansion of production. Thus, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1869, p. 117) defended a regime of temperance and frugality:

> The destiny of man on earth is entirely spiritual and moral; the regime that this destiny imposes on him is a regime of frugality. Relative to its power of consumption, to the infinity of its desires, to the splendours of its ideal, the material resources of 'humanity' are very

> limited. . . . This is the law imposed on us by our earthly condition. . . . The nations which pursue, as their supreme good, material wealth and the pleasures it provides, are nations which are in decline.

This defence of a general regime of sobriety – thought of as the only way to oppose progress and as a critique of the deep roots of capitalist accumulation – gradually disappeared after 1880, while workers' wages and popular consumption increased. In this context, ideas of moderation and limit tended to be rejected more and more as an essentially moral discourse, aimed first at popular people seeking to constrain their practices, while the elites feared the emergence of the masses at the time of universal suffrage and the awakening of the workers' movement. Afterwards, a moralising conception of sobriety emerges, linked to the religious fight for temperance and criticism of drinking alcohol, making the notion of moderation increasingly unacceptable and invisible as a collective and emancipatory project during the 20th century. On the contrary, consumption and spending are promoted as cardinal values, socialism more and more redefining itself as the means of redistributing to the greatest number the fruits of the now desirable growth in production.

End-of-the-century doubts

However, at the time of acceleration in the growth of production at the end of the 19th century, parallel to the rise of French colonisation, and the first globalisation of trade, many doubts were expressed at the margins – notably in certain anarchist circles, questioning the promises of modernity and permanently calling into question the ambivalence of a 'progress' reduced to the power of industrial production.

In France, the small movement of so-called anarcho-naturists born in Paris in 1894, on the initiative of the painter and designer Émile Gravelle and on the occasion of the publication of the newspaper *L'Etat Naturel*, embodied radical critics of industrial civilisation and its ongoing modernisation project. Gravelle and various other naturist activists defended the principles of a natural life opposed to the prevailing artificialisation (Jarrige 2024). Subsequently, the movement grew, giving rise to publications, and more or less ephemeral groups were formed in Paris and in the provinces. They experimented with communal life while continuing to question the false needs of industrial and bourgeois society. For around 20 years, these small groups continued to denounce the absurdities of industrial civilisation, its dead ends, campaigning for a return to a 'natural life'.

These authors, early pioneers of political ecology at a time when the word 'ecology' was rare, attempted to invent an alternative trajectory to that of industrial gigantism which then prevailed in countries like Germany and the United States. They warned against the ravages of industrialisation, denounced the madness of imperialist expansion, and campaigned for a simpler and frugal life based on the refusal of adulterated goods. For them, the revolution and the seizure of power were lures, and economic reform an illusion. They focused first on transforming lifestyles and breaking with dominant beliefs, hence their early interest in personal and food hygiene. Faced with the impasses of industrial civilisation, which appeared more obvious every day – with convict factories, and sprawling and polluted cities – the only solution lay in the establishment of a 'natural state' described as the antithesis of the reviled modern world. Rejecting scientism and the productivist dream of socialists and liberals who sought to domesticate nature, these anarcho-naturists were, on the contrary, supporters of a return to the state of nature perceived as a source of harmony, abundance and freedom whereas industrial civilisation alienated, oppressed and created disorder everywhere.

In the preface to a brochure written by Tchandala (1901, p. 5), Zisly, 'one of our most valiant and modest champions of the provincial anti-scientific cause', offers a summary of the anarcho-naturist doctrine:

> It is the fight engaged against Civilization, this monster with multiple forms, against Science, this new religion, against machinery, this uselessness and this vulgarity. . . . The natural state is not, as some individuals like to believe, the return to the past, but on the contrary, it is the true march forward, for the existence of true, tangible, real progress.

These debates were far from isolated or marginal at the beginning of the 20th century. They joined numerous warnings expressed at the time against 'progress' and its damage – deforestation, general pollution and smoke, chemical food and depletion of resources. A 'back to the land' aspiration also mainly ran through industrialised societies of the end of the 19th century, like the doubts and fears with regard to sciences and techniques which seemed to delay realising their promises, undoubtedly becoming the first formulations of what would be called 'degrowth' a century later.

The project of these anarcho-naturists, who were involved in '*milieux libres*' and the search for autonomous lifestyles, aimed to create a harmonious world based on a more realistic science of the natural world and society. In his text on the 'formation of topsoil', Gravelle intended to reveal the 'gross errors established about Nature' by showing how altruistic nature can be and how modern agriculture threatens to destroy the soil (Jarrige 2024). While ethnology and the study of prehistory emerged and became institutionalised, naturists relied on these discoveries to challenge the feeling of superiority of so-called civilised peoples and the dominant evolutionary vision of theorists of economic growth (Patou-Mathis 2011).

At the end of the 19th century, prehistory was in fashion, amateur archaeologists became passionate about prehistoric man, while the discoveries of parietal art in caves multiplied. The representation of prehistoric man as a primitive, fundamentally barbaric and violent being is contrasted by another vision describing him as a peaceful being living in abundance – just as the natives colonised by Europeans become a source of inspiration and fascination. By advocating a form of primitivism, by exalting the benefits of the simple life against the false needs produced by capitalism, the naturists spoke out against the idols of their time and sought shortcuts to a thought-provoking progress as an inevitable and one-way process. Furthermore, their call for small communities resonated with a new vision of the revolution that developed in the wake of the Commune of 1871, based on communal autonomy and the promotion of small autonomous units.

'The Wild Indian and the Civilized Man' by the anarcho-naturist Alex (1895) appeared in the newspaper *Le Libertaire*, where he asserted the superiority of the first over the second – the natural man 'works for his pleasure and his benefit' and he 'rests when he is tired'. Alex (1895) asked, 'How many of us would give all the years of our lives for a few days of the free, beautiful and natural existence of savages?' Alfred Marné (1898), who led the so-called wilderness movement among naturists, called for 'grass to invade the roads, the railway lines, the streets, the boulevards' so that:

> life will reappear from everywhere, the hills will green up, the mountains will be reforested, the earth will flower again, and in the shade of the big trees, men, women, old people and children, we will go dancing in circles.

At a time when many unleashed against the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, naturists claimed the opposite, making him the champion of nature and the noble savage.

To understand this ambition to reconnect with nature as industrialisation accelerated, we must remember the extent to which the period 1894–1914, after the drama of the Great War (1914–1918), became perceived a posteriori as a 'beautiful era'. In reality the earlier period was difficult, troubled by the brutality of social, economic and cultural transformations, by the triumph of capitalism profoundly disrupting societies, particularly in countries like France with significant peasantry and small property. Even though the 'growth' of the national product started to rise again after 1895 modestly, inequalities remained spectacular and struck observers. In Paris, around 1910, the infant mortality rate was twice as high in working-class neighbourhoods as in wealthy neighbourhoods.

The decades preceding the Great War were a time of change in economic and technical systems. Chemistry, automobiles and oil were great totems of the industrial growth as the 20th century began to emerge. The long list of discoveries and innovations was perceived as extraordinary and disconcerting. If many were enthusiastic and celebrated the potential of these new developments – imagining the advent of an era of progress and abundance – others, on the contrary, warned against the risks of loss of control and the alienation of this technical gigantism and increasingly complex society. Anticipatory dystopian stories proliferated at the time, depicting the end of the world. In France, J-H Rosny Aîné (1912) published *La Mort de la Terre* (The death of the earth), a story of a distant future where the planet is nothing more than an immense 'desert of death' due to overexploitation (Jarrige 2014).

The Great War, however, imposed a sudden end to these debates and projects, in the name of a sacred union and general mobilisation. A new productivist consensus emerged which saw, in the continued growth of production, the salvation of humans. After the war, these first experiences of decline disintegrated: some turned increasingly towards vegetarianism and withdrew from individualistic lifestyles, while others like Victor Serge joined the Bolshevik revolution. Many remained silent and renounced all propaganda by trying to be satisfied with the existing social order or by withdrawing into their private spheres. The experience of the Great War produced profoundly ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it validated critical analyses of the barbarity of industrial civilisation and its destructive violence. On the other hand, it rallied the socialist movement around faith in technological progress, which Lenin expressed, after the war, when describing communism as 'Soviet power plus electrification'.

The serious crisis of the 1930s, the terrible World War II, followed by rapid modernisation after 1945, subsequently contributed to burying the ideal of moderate production while inventing modern economic growth and indicators like gross domestic product (GDP). Nature ceased to be perceived as a possible source of progress, to become more than ever a brake and blocking factor to be removed by an ever-increasing artificialisation of the world. Throughout the 20th century, the ideals of frugal abundance and harmony with the natural world were delegitimised by the rise of a productivist consensus across the political field, especially in France where the theme of any 'return to nature' was discredited due to the Vichy nazi regime propaganda, which made extensive use of this slogan all the while increasing its modernisation policy.

Opening the black box of growth in the 1970s

Throughout the 20th century, authors continued to criticise exponential technical development and challenged the obsession with growth in production, which they accused of contaminating the world. For example, Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau from the 1930s, and the Socialism or Barbarism group in the 1960s, denounced the increasing obsession with growth even though they were constantly marginalised and unheard for a long time. Even in the high-growth era of the 'thirty glorious years' (1945–1975), we are just rediscovering the extent to which doubts and

criticisms of the productivist consensus were expressed (Charbonneau and Ellul 2014; Pessis et al. 2013).

In France degrowth, as a concept criticising both the physical and cultural limits to growth, is truly born in the 1970s, when the confidence and productivist consensus of the 20th century cracked again. 'Degrowth' begins to circulate within various intellectual and activist networks, among currents of ecological economics and other heterodox economic schools, as a critique of the ideology of economic growth which has become a real dogma structuring public policies during the second half of the 20th century. Degrowth suggests that it is essential to initiate a contraction of economies by reducing production and consumption, and that it is possible to do so without reducing the well-being of the greatest number of people. Degrowth is, then, a rare theory proposing to take seriously the material and physical foundations of contemporary societies, while endorsing the mythical theory of decoupling according to which innovations would make it possible to dissociate economic growth and its negative environmental impacts.

Until the decades of high growth in the Western world in the second half of the 20th century, which saw the violent elimination of peasant societies, distrust in excessive accumulation, prudence and modest lifestyles was a widely shared norm, particularly in working-class circles. While there was certainly already an obsession with growth of production and expansion of trade, there were no indicators or aggregates of economic activity. Statistics were collected in a scattered manner and did not guide society. The emergence of national accounting, primarily with GDP, resulted from the great crisis of capitalism of the 1930s. To confront that crisis the US government searched for more systematic and synthetic measuring instruments in order to manage expansion. Economist Simon Kuznets, the so-called Nobel prize winner in economics in 1971, developed the first forms of GDP measurement while warning of its limits and risks of reductionism. Its adoption took place largely via international organisations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has continued to reinvent the GDP and try to save it in the face of attacks (Schmelzer 2016).

Very early on, observers and intellectuals attempted to open the 'black box' of this growth paradigm, which became myth and mirage, to shed light on its functioning and evaluate its effects and impasses. While economic theory developed, leaving aside the deleterious consequences on nature, the question of 'negative externalities' gradually emerged. The aporias and 'tragedy' of the GDP growth indicator have been pointed out a thousand times, without its influence seeming to diminish (Rist 2013, 2019).

In France, '*décroissance*' was formulated for the first time in 1972 during a debate organised by the *Nouvel Observateur*. André Gorz (1923–2007) questioned the relationship between growth and capitalism: 'The global balance, of which the non-growth – or even the decrease – of material production is a condition, is this global balance compatible with the survival of the (capitalist) system'? His thoughts arose in the context of the debate on 'zegism' (a contraction of 'zero economic growth'), which followed the publication of the Club of Rome report calling for 'zero growth' to limit pressure on resources. The debate became intense in the following years of oil shocks, energy crises and the rise of environmental warnings formulated in a context of strong social conflicts, and the birth of the environmental movement with anti-nuclear and peace movements.

Physical limits to growth were associated with a systemic critique emphasising the incompatibility of such limits for the capitalist economic system. But critics and debates were much deeper and broader. For example, before he was French President (1974–1981) Valery Giscard d'Estaing – when asked in 1972 on French public television to summarise the radical critiques of growth movement ideas – did not mention the physical limits to growth. Michel Lepesant (2021) summarised his main emphasis on cultural and anthropological perspectives:

> Intellectually, these theories pose a fundamental question . . . [for us] to consider that the continuation of current growth will lead to a kind of collective collapse. And they give the following arguments: first of all, living conditions that are increasingly unbearable for the population, for example the very rapid pace of urbanisation . . . the insoluble problem of transport, the nervous exhaustion that accompanies these living conditions and, in general . . . irritation in a society that is being pushed to the limit of its capacity to adapt . . . So growth, which appeared to produce only one good, is now creating a number of disadvantages, a number of nuisances that are increasingly difficult to tolerate. So the theorists of this doctrine draw a simple conclusion: "we have to stop growth". If we stopped growth . . . we could improve living conditions and not accumulate material wealth indefinitely. These, I believe, are the arguments of the proponents of the stop-growth theory. I would like to tell you who these supporters are: first of all, there are those known as the Club of Rome, that is to say a certain number of researchers and theoreticians who have developed the doctrine of zero growth, and as you know, they have recently received some striking support in the person of Mr Mansholt, who is the President of the European Economic Commission. I presented this thesis, and I can tell you straight away that it's not mine.

Opposition between growth and degrowth emerged during these years in close connection with the rise of a heterodox economy nourished by systems theory and functional ecology. The Romanian mathematician and economist Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen published major works, which challenged the dominant economic orthodoxy: he proposed a new paradigm around a 'bioeconomic perspective', consisting of applying the laws of physics, in particular the second law of thermodynamics, known as the law of entropy, to economic theory. He suggested reducing the material footprint by contesting the madness of unlimited expansion supported by economic science, whether Marxist or neoclassical inspired.

It was not until 1979 that the first work used the word *décroissance*. French philosopher Jacques Grinevald (with Ivo Rens) proposed to use this term as the title of a collection of Georgescu-Roegen's translated articles. French-speaking Georgescu-Roegen (1995) validated that title. It was a question of breaking with 'oxymoronic policies', such as 'sustainable development' – described as 'snake oil' – to think about the roots of the problems (Georgescu-Roegen 1993a, 1993b).

After intense debates in the 1970s, the controversy seemed to end after 1980 with the ideological steamroller of neo-liberalism and the incessant modernising revivals, the rise of an unprecedented confidence in globalisation brought by the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the promises of the end of history identified with consumption. Georgescu-Roegen and other degrowth pioneers are put aside in France and forgotten while globalisation, coupled with the computerisation of the world, leads to an immaterial 'green growth', supposed to resolve the social and ecological impasses of the old industrial world.

In France, lucid observers like Jacques Ellul or Bernard Charbonneau, among others, continued to point out the impasses of these dominant development models, but they were barely heard and largely invisible as the concept of 'degrowth' moved underground.

Resurgence, visibility and controversy

After a long hiatus in the 1980s and 1990s, the term *décroissance* spectacularly re-emerged, spread, and entered the political and activist arena at the beginning of the 21st century, designating a sub-group of political ecologists committed to criticising economic development as the dominant ideology (Duverger 2011, 2020).

Although seen as an aspect of and inspired by a long genealogy of questions about the Western industrial trajectory, the word *décroissance* only came to the fore on the French protest scene in 2002, with a convergence between anti-development and anti-advertising movements. On 28 February, a major symposium was held at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Palace in Paris, organised by the association La Ligne d'Horizon les Amis de François Partant and the monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Under the patronage of Ivan Illich, *Defaire le Développement, Refaire le Monde* (Deconstruct Development, Rebuild the World) brought together anti-development currents from the Global South and North. Their proceedings (*Actes du colloque défaire le développement, refaire le monde* 2002) state:

> Historically, the era of development followed on from that of colonisation, just as the era of globalisation is taking over from that of development. The westernisation of the world and planetary standardisation are reinforced by the unlimited accumulation of capital under the ever-increasing domination of transnational corporations. Economic warfare and inequality are no longer confined to people-to-people relations, but also take place within national boundaries. Environmental destruction is universal.

In parallel, in February 2002, the magazine *S!lence* (no. 280) published a dossier on 'sustainable and convivial degrowth' with contributors to the UNESCO symposium. Directly inspired by the work of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, it opened with an editorial co-written by Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin (2002), leaders of the association Casseurs de Pub and anti-advertising activists who had broken away from their professional activities, who wrote:

> The ecological crisis is above all a revelation of the political, cultural, philosophical and spiritual impasse into which our civilisation is sinking. The war that our 'modern' societies are waging on the Earth is a reflection of the war that humans in rich countries are waging on their conscience. Conditioned by the ideology of consumerism and trapped in a blind faith in science, our world is looking for an answer that will not contradict its exponential desire for objects and services, while at the same time having a clear conscience. The ethical concept of 'sustainable development' has provided a perfect response to this need. The term should now return to its rightful place on the cream pie shelf.

The word 'degrowth' is immediately accompanied by two adjectives: sustainable and convivial. The dimension of sustainability raises the question of the physical and ecological (im)possibility of infinite growth in a finite world. The notion of conviviality challenges growth as an essential and effective engine for producing well-being, real emancipation and meaning. For degrowth à la Française, the articulation of both is fundamental. 'The problem with sustainable development is not so much with the word sustainable, which is a rather nice expression as with the concept of development, which is a downright "toxic word"', explains economist and philosopher Serge Latouche (2002). He played a fundamental role in the recognition and spread of 'degrowth' in France (Latouche 2003, 2006, Chapter 24, this volume).

History of a provocative slogan

Casseur de Pub, a former advertising executive, had the brilliant intuition of deliberately choosing the slogan '*décroissance*' for at least two reasons. The first anticipates the crushing greenwashing that was in its infancy at the time and has since become legion and is designed to avoid any attempt

by the dominant system to co-opt the term. Faced with growing awareness of the environmental and social limits of capitalism, marketing tends to adapt such messages by integrating them, draining them of their meaning. The second reason is that it directly attacks the heart of the central ideology, the religion of growth. Both reasons proved correct. Two decades later, all related slogans from sustainable development to sobriety, from sharing economy to conviviality, have been co-opted by the dominant system to become green-social-washing marketing tools.

Despite the proliferation of reports and articles highlighting the limits of GDP, in terms of sustainability or measuring the well-being of a society, its ideological centrality remains glaringly obvious. Hardly a day goes by without degrowth being virulently attacked, without argument or substance, so much so that it seems to represent blasphemy. GDP growth remains the alpha and omega of all the policies and perspectives of the dominant system. Tackling the myth of degrowth means freeing ourselves from a reductive vision that is purely economic and quantitative, in order to '*décroire*' (literally 'debelieve'). Despite the misunderstandings often dishonestly perpetuated, degrowth is not about doing the opposite of growth.

Semantically, '*a-croissance*' (a-growth) would be the right word, as in 'a-theism'. But, degrowth is an invitation to tackle societal issues in a more complex way, by asking, 'What are our fundamental needs?' How can we meet needs in ways that are sustainable, fair, shared, democratic and convivial? Rather than optimising the toxic, how can we reclaim the meaning we want to give to our lives? To our activities? Degrowth à la française is really about the decolonisation of the dominant economic imaginary.

The birth of a movement

Various networks soon converge to develop the concept of degrowth and a public space for the articulation of various initiatives that spread out at the beginning of the 21st century, when struggles such as those against genetically modified organisms proliferate and the shadow of climate change begins to loom large. Allies include supporters of voluntary simplicity, agro-ecology, ecovillages, permaculture and community-supported agriculture – Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne (Associations for Maintaining Small-scale Family Farming); non-violent communities and neo-ruralists; the alternative and solidarity economy, civil disobedience, ad-buster, cycling, vegetarian and vegan movements; post-development advocates, and the peakists. Significantly, the degrowth movement fills a gap left by the cost of putting the brakes on alter-globalism after the 9/11 tragedy in 2001.

A first large conference is organised in the city hall of Lyon in September 2003 with, among others, Jacques Grinveald, Serge Latouche, Paul Ariès, Sylvie Ferrari, François Schneider and Pierre Rabhi. In keeping with Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's heritage, the cultural dimension of the limits to growth is very central as shown in the contributions '*La décroissance, condition et non obstacle, à une société conviviale*' (Degrowth, a condition and not an obstacle to a convivial society) by Serge Latouche (Chapter 24, this volume) and '*La décroissance soutenable appliquée pour une sobriété heureuse*' (Sustainable degrowth applied to happy sobriety) by Algerian-French founder of agro-ecology Pierre Rabhi.

In March 2004, the first edition of the monthly *La Décroissance: Le journal de la joie de vivre* (*Degrowth: The journal of the joys of life*) appears, and is still (at the end of 2024) issuing 20,000–30 000 copies every month. The emulation of degrowth is relatively strong, in particular within young activist circles. In summer 2005, initiated by François Schneider, thousands of them join the walk for degrowth from Lyon to the Magny-Cours Formula 1 racetrack to request an end to car races.

Following this dynamism, in October 2005, *les etats généraux de la décroissance* (degrowth movement constitutive assemblies) are held in Lyon to decide on how to organise the degrowth movement. In April 2006, the Parti Pour La Décroissance (PPLD) (Party for Degrowth) is officially founded. Networks start around the very active online forum *decroissance.info*, locally, and later with the Mouvement des Objecteurs de Croissance (MOC) (Movement of Objectors to Growth). In December 2008, a decision is made to participate in the European Elections and the call Europe-Décroissance is launched online, soon signed by hundreds of people. After the European election, degrowth networks are very active organising the first gathering in Notre-Dame-Des-Landes, later maintained and becoming a premiere 'ZAD' (*zone à défendre*).

At the same time several degrowth activists are active in Mouvement Utopia, an influential trans-party intellectual think-tank, and play a significant role in introducing degrowth ideas and principles, and anti-productivism, to left political movements. Others are involved in ATTAC – the Association pour la Taxation des Transactions Financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizen Action) – or in Friends of the Earth. The degrowth networks face some inside ego-conflicts; some decide to support or join the new-born Europe-Ecology les Verts (ex-Green Party) or Parti de Gauche (a new radical left party, also supported at the time by degrowth advocate Paul Ariès) and participate in writing the *Planification Écologique*. Yves Cochet, then Minister of Environment, brings these debates to the French Assemblée Nationale and later to the European Parliament.

These initial years of the degrowth movements in France are dominated by political activism and degrowth in practice. Often, both are articulated together, as in the ZAD of Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (Nantes), where resistance against the construction of an airport connects with prefigurative experimentation in what could be a degrowth model of society – direct democracy, alternative non-speculative economic models, commons, self-organisation, non-violent communication, permaculture and agroecology, care and low-tech. These complementarities and the importance of articulating several dimensions of degrowth are fundamental for the French degrowth movement. Paul Ariès first spoke about three levels of degrowth: voluntary simplicity, collective experimentation and political projects. Michel Lepesant added one more dimension 'visibility', later all four synthesised in *Exploring Degrowth* (Liegey and Nelson 2020, p. 53) as articulated spheres:

> [T]he degrowth movement's four characteristic spheres of action are explained by teasing out typical expressions and activities in each sphere as well as identifying relationships between each sphere. These focal points of our analysis and spheres of action are the individual sphere, the collective sphere, the sphere of resistance, and the sphere of the degrowth project.

In parallel, the intellectual debates on degrowth are very rich in France, with the publication of several successful books by Latouche, Ariès, Cheynet, Ridoux and Schneider, and due to documentaries, interviews and articles in highly visible media such as *Le Monde Diplomatique* and *Libération*. In 2006, *Entropia*, a journal for the theoretical and political study of degrowth, is launched. For several years it contributes to the political and intellectual development of this movement, despite its demise after 10 years of publication and 16 issues (*Entropia* undated). In each issue, a dozen contributors explore a particular theme from a degrowth perspective, themes such as politics, work, utopia, technics, power, and the state.

Degrowth in politics in France reaches a peak after the European Elections in 2009, with the constitution of the Association des Objecteurs de Croissance (AdOC) (Association of Objectors to Growth), which brings together several streams of degrowth. In September 2009, a political

degrowth platform (Attendees 2009) is validated by consensus and proposes a very clear definition of degrowth, a pathway, a political strategy and a project:

> The 'Growth society' . . . dramatically creates a combined crisis. . . . Fundamentally, it is the expression of one and the same madness: a world that has become inhuman, as if the belief in « always more » was enough to give it meaning.
>
> . . . we offer a new paradigm: an immediate exit from capitalism and productivism through all the practical alternative ways of living life which either exist or are still to be created. . . . We do not want any other form of development, any other type of growth, any other way of consuming or any more productivism. We want to leave behind the religion of Growth which has increased inequality, exhausted resources, wiped out biodiversity and denied human dignity.

This platform proposes a strategy for degrowth based on how to change the world without taking power, and articulates three levers of degrowth: presence in the public debates, direct experimentations of degrowth and work on the project. The platform presents a clear political agenda through open relocalisation, implementation of an unconditional autonomy allowance (articulating universal basic services and free access to basic goods) and a maximum income, to taxing mis- or over-usage, to exit (abolish) car and nuclear industries, rejecting the cult of technology, and for an emancipatory education. 'The establishment of *democracy*' is called for in strong terms, 'by putting an end to media and advertising propaganda, facilitating collective decision-making about economic matters, re-localising the centres of democratic control, setting up protective measures to avoid abuses of power' (Attendees 2009).

Unfortunately, characteristics of the first decade of degrowth returned – several ego conflicts hidden by superficial ideological disagreements. 'The snail went back to its shell'. AdOC was dismantled, the PPLD went to sleep, and the MOC was transformed into the Maison Commune de la Décroissance (MCD). Still, rather more underground and less in the media, degrowth played an important and influential intellectual and political role. Paul Ariès kept repeating that our ideas themselves were far stronger than our active and organised networks. The last media and political peaks of degrowth in the early 2010s were two books presenting a synthesis of these political dynamics around degrowth. *Un Projet de Décroissance* (Liegey et al. 2013) is a collective manifesto by key actors of the PPLD and proposes a political project for degrowth based on the idea of an unconditional autonomy allowance. *Politique(s) de la Décroissance* by Michel Lepesant (2013) explores the dilemmas and challenges for degrowth in politics, in particular the debate around how to change the world without taking power.

Key degrowth activists then started to focus on other projects locally with degrowth in practice, by joining other political parties, through municipalist initiatives, with the think-tank Institut Momentum or journal *Sciences Critiques*, spending time in the Nantes ZAD, participating in the internationalisation of the movement, international degrowth conferences, or through research and publications. Serge Latouche launched the series *Les Précurseurs et Précurseuses de la Décroissance*, exploring intellectual pillars of degrowth and analysing from a degrowth perspective how earlier streams could enrich degrowth debates. Each book focuses on a degrowth so-called pioneer, such as Cornelius Castoriadis (autonomy), Ivan Illich (conviviality), Jacques Ellul (technician totalitarianism), Charles Fourier (utopian socialism), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (anarchism), Françoise d'Eaubonne (ecofeminism) and André Gorz (political ecology).

Although some extreme right-wing theorists used, and tried to appropriate, the term – Alain de Benoist even reused Georgescu-Roegen's book title *Demain la décroissance* in 2007 – they remain

marginal. Degrowth thinkers and activists are participating in the politics of emancipation, even claiming a leftist position in the political spectrum. Paul Ariès (2012) coordinated the collection *Décroissance ou Récession: Pour une Décroissance de Gauche* to reaffirm degrowth.

In the second half of the 2010s degrowth recedes in public debates substituted by the emerging concept 'collapsology'. Charismatic Pablo Servigne, a degrowth fellow traveller, and his co-authors focus on the *diagnosis* – going beyond internal conflicts of degrowth and related movement galaxies – so collapsology occupies a large space in the media. This educates a new generation of environmental activists, the climate generation joining the march for the future, Extinction Rebellion activist groups and later the environmental collective Les Soulèvements de la Terre. Often, degrowth proponents criticise the collapsology movement for offering an opportunistic pretext for the mainstream media to depoliticise degrowth debates and sweep radical anthropological critics of the growth model of society under the carpet.

At the same time, a silent transformation is underway, as degrowth starts to be discretely debated in unexpected spheres of society – enterprises, public institutions, elite universities, mainstream research institutes and think tanks – beyond the confines of limited politicised and radical intellectual circles. The first surveys showing emerging majorities in favour of degrowth ideas and principles start to be published. After COVID-19 experiences offer a platform to engage with degrowth and more radical critics, degrowth returns to media debates in the early 2020s – in September 2020, with the Green Party primary election and Delphine Batho supporting degrowth; with the publication of *Décroissance: Fake or Not* (Liegey and Brockman 2021); the best seller *Ralentir ou Périr* written by young economist Timothée Parrique (2022); *La Décroissance et ses Déclinaisons* (MCD 2022); and the *Décroissances* collection (Jarrige and Tordjman 2023). In April 2022, the Observatoire de la Décroissance et de la Post-Croissance (OPCD) is launched, bringing together almost all of the historic figures and streams of degrowth with newcomers like Alter Kapitae. Then, the first academic francophone journal *Mondes en Décroissance* is launched in the framework of OPCD. Summer 2023 sees the first successful degrowth festival.

In a world marked by the recognition of climate catastrophe and the collapse of biodiversity, by pandemic terrors and the return of wars and shortages, degrowth is acquiring more circulation and validity than ever, despite its tensions and ambiguities. Supported by French majorities, as shown in survey after survey (Liegey 2024), it is still violently rejected by the dominant system and its diverse and complementary networks lack strong coordination.

Degrowth or barbarity

For several years now, hardly a week has gone by without a major political figure making a media appearance to attack degrowth head-on. No degrowth spokesperson or thinker has ever been given the right of reply as it has been abused, distorted and even demonised. The beginning of 2024 was no exception, with the farmers' movement and within the European elections taking a rather amusing turn. French President Emmanuel Macron and Jordan Bardella, the leader of the far-right Rassemblement National Party (RN), accuse each other of being the driving force behind degrowth! The crossfire is recounted in Liegey (2024) as follows. On 13 January, the head of the RN makes an attack in an interview in the weekly *Journal Du Dimanche* – 'The whole action of the current President of the European Commission, with the support of Emmanuel Macron, can be summed up in one word: "Degrowth"'. A month later, on 24 February, during an eventful visit to an agricultural fair, the President of the Republic replied: 'French agriculture deserves better than their project of degrowth and stupidity'. If only!

Against these flourishing caricatures, many people are now working to give greater political, theoretical and even existential substance to the concept and practice of degrowth. More and more people see it as a possible compass. Commitment to degrowth has grown, giving rise to a large-scale but fragmented and heterogeneous social movement that brings together a wide range of groups, from degrowth-labelled political parties to the most informal local groups. There are even attempts to adopt degrowth in 'business as usual' companies and corporations. Novel and controversial, constantly being pushed back by academics and media, degrowth is also increasingly claimed and appropriated by people in search of radical choices. Activists are trying to recreate politics and commitment in the context of systemic and permanent institutional crises. In search of coherence and new identities that renounce artificial happiness, they are opting for moderation, inventing sustainable lifestyles, and closer relationships with humans and non-humans.

Degrowth: À la française legacy and challenges

Even if degrowth as a slogan and a movement was born in 2002, its origins, influences, pioneers, pillars and debates were already very strong in the 1970s, having grown since the beginnings of industrial transformations. If physical limits to growth and debates around the possibility of decoupling have always occupied degrowth discourses, 'degrowth *à la française*' always articulated the cultural and anthropological dimensions: *sustainable and convivial degrowth*. It emphasised conviviality, as in the degrowth platform for convergence: '[e]ven if infinite growth in a finite world were possible, consumption and productivism would still be absurd' (Attendees 2009). This ambition to radically move out of the dominant economistic imaginary is still there.

Degrowth à la française offers a radical in-depth criticism of the Western model of development. It is an invitation to bring together a multi-dimensional set of thoughts to deconstruct toxic structural concepts such as capitalism, productivism, development, consumerism, materialism, economism, techno-scientism, industrialism and patriarchy. This fundamental legacy has been richly spelt out in hundreds of books and other texts and debates. Unfortunately, at times it is forgotten or ignored – within the French degrowth movement by a new generation of activists and academics influenced by collapsology; by a strongly narrowing focus on climate change – instead of appreciating ecology holistically; and in secondary debates, say on decoupling, in international degrowth networks. As such, there is a risk of betraying the early ambitions of degrowth as an invitation to move out of the dominant economistic imaginary. In 2008, when *décroissance* was translated into English as 'degrowth' and spectacularly entered the academic sphere, the fears and risks were high. One and a half decades later, its future is still pending. But there are good reasons to be re-assured. Let's share, explore and revive the French heritage of degrowth.

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6

DEGROWTH IN ITALY

Early beginnings, political disputes and a plural social movement

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Introduction

A web search for newspaper articles with the terms '*decrescita*' (degrowth in Italian) and '*decrescita felice'* ('happy degrowth', the name and slogan of one of the two main degrowth associations in Italy) rapidly provides an idea of the contradictory position that the terms have in the Italian public debate. On the one hand, there are interviews with Serge Latouche (Battaglia 2023), references to Maurizio Pallante (Bevilacqua 2015), founder of the Movimento per la Decrescita Felice (Movement for Happy Degrowth) (MDF), and discussions of ecological policy proposals, new efficient technologies or choices of voluntary simplicity (Gentile 2023). On the other hand, we find political polemics – often from the political right, but also from the progressive centre-left – in which *decrescita* and even more so *decrescita felice* are employed as insults to the political enemy. Often the enemy is the Five Star Movement (M5S), which occasionally in the past has shown ambiguous political proximity to the concept of degrowth. Usually the intention of the insults is to ridicule the political enemy as immature, technology-adverse and against the 'common' goal of increasing well-being (Genova24 2024). The term 'degrowth' has also been used as a synonym for population loss in Messina (Olivieri 2023), as the absence of economic success of a skiing project (Pagliaro et al. 2021), and even positioning 'sexual recession as the technical weapon of happy degrowth' (Minuz 2023). Only rarely, it seems, is degrowth in the Italian public debate employed seriously, even though it is a relatively frequent term.

How has this come about? And, what is the role of the real-existing Italian degrowth movement in this context? What internal evolutions have taken place? How is the movement trying to reaffirm the importance of seriously discussing degrowth pathways in contemporary Italy? These are some of the questions that we navigate in this chapter on the history and role of the degrowth movement in Italy. We are academics, activists and activist-researchers from the two main Italian degrowth associations. None of us, though, is a social movement researcher. So, what we provide here is more of a self-reflective account of each of our experiences of moving across the Italian degrowth movement for between 10 and 15 years, referring to the literature without any systematic research. This approach has obvious intrinsic limitations in relation to the forms of knowledge, information and instruments of interpretation that we have access to but attempts, anyhow, to point

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out some of the crucial factors of the ongoing evolution of the movement in Italy from which more systematic research may develop.

In this chapter, first, we provide a historical account of the early beginnings of the Italian degrowth movement. Then we discuss the structural and ideological differences between the two main degrowth associations. Afterwards, we discuss four aspects of the Italian movement and its history that we consider crucial: the networks and alliances with other movements and local practices, the ephemeral and contradictory early popularity of the term in Italian politics, the complex relationship with feminist perspectives, and the current efforts to change the course of the movement's activities towards positioning it as a pluralistic movement that proactively integrates ecological with social concerns.

Early beginnings

The word '*décroissance*' (degrowth) was first used in February 2002, as a provocative slogan to denounce the mystification of the ideology of sustainable development (Latouche 2014), in the issue dedicated to this new paradigm of the magazine *Silence* (no. 200), while its first public appearance was at the international conference 'Défaire le développement refaire le monde' organised by la Ligne d'Horizon at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris. The extraordinary participation in this event was the sign that something was shifting in the collective imaginary.

Until then, in fact, degrowth-related ideas had been of interest only to the 'small international of critics of development' coalesced around Ivan Illich (Latouche cited in Bonaiuti 2014, p. xiv), with their anthropological and social critique of modern society, as well as within a part of the varied, yet contradictory, ecological movement of the time. The strength of the nascent degrowth paradigm was precisely that of bringing together these two currents of thought in a coherent vision, tying the question of the biophysical limits of economic growth together with its destructiveness and senselessness on a social and cultural level, thus advancing a holistic criticism of the dominant model of society.

In Italy this perspective found support in a small group around the Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences (MAUSS) which included, among others, the Italian scholars Mauro Bonaiuti, Marco Deriu and Onofrio Romano. In particular, Bonaiuti was invited to the UNESCO conference and later in September 2003 to the first international conference explicitly dedicated to degrowth in Lyon, as an expert of Georgescu-Roegen, the first economist who had developed a radical scientific critique of sustainable development (Bonaiuti 2011, 2018). That led to an early and collaborative relationship between the French and the Italian groups, destined to last over the years.

The first public initiative in Italy was the School of Alternatives held in Gerace in summer 2004. On that occasion, the first Italian nucleus of a Rete per la Decrescita (Network for Degrowth) was founded, which formalised itself as the Associazione per la Decrescita (Association for Degrowth, AD) in July of the following year. In addition to the numerous conferences that Serge Latouche held with great success throughout Italy in that period, in September 2004 *Obiettivo decrescita* (Goal degrowth) was also published, a collection of writings on the theme, translated from the French book with that title.

In the same period, Maurizio Pallante came to the attention of the public with a scathing article known as 'The parable of the yoghurt', in which he showed in simple and effective language the contradictions of the dominant market economy. Following that first release, and in the wake of the interest that the 'bullet-word' degrowth was meeting, the AD gave life to a periodical akin to the French monthly magazine *La Decroissance*. Maurizio Pallante was invited to participate in

the project but soon declined the invitation, considering it to be 'too intellectual' for his ideas of action. Afterwards, he founded his own organisation, MDF.

This process of separation was not an easy one, leading to a fracture between the two associations which marked the Italian movement of degrowth for years until 2012 when, in the wake of the 3rd International Conference held in Venice, both associations felt that this separation between activists that were fighting for a better and less competitive society was absurd and decided, therefore, to start collaborating once again. A collaboration that has become more and more important in the following years and has led to the co-organisation of important events, shared working groups between the two associations, and the publication of co-authored documents.

Differences in the Italian degrowth movement

Why are there two degrowth associations in Italy? The main reason is to be found in the aforementioned early beginnings of the Italian degrowth movement, in differences about the action and practices that were to be pursued, which lead also to personal conflicts, as often happens in transformative movements. But there have also been some differences between the *approaches* of the two associations. In this section we explore these differences and discuss how they evolved over time.

Based on a survey conducted at the Fourth International Degrowth Conference held in Leipzig (Germany) in 2014, Schmelzer and Eversberg (2017) have proposed a spectrum within the degrowth movement, built around ideological and personal differences reported by respondents. While their analysis cannot be directly transferred to the Italian context, the clusters they identify can be a useful starting point. In many regards, large parts of MDF's membership can be associated with the first cluster of 'sufficiency-oriented critics of civilisation', degrowth activists who Schmelzer and Eversberg (2017) characterise as having a strong belief in the importance of individual responsibilities, action and lifestyle changes, and a large agreement with ideas such as a return to nature, dismantling cities and a tendency to consider the question of climate change as a more relevant problem than social inequalities.

Instead, their third cluster exhibits preferences for a more systemic, collective and political (rather than individualistic) view of the problems of the growth society – closer to positions of the AD, which has always proposed a multi-faceted concept of degrowth action, that addresses social, ecological and economical issues as different but intertwined crises, an analytical approach striving for more complex concrete actions but with a greater distance from everyday practices. 'From this point of view, good transformational practices require the prior formulation of sound theory, and forms of activism deriving their principles from anything else tend to be seen as naive, futile or even dangerous' report Schmelzer and Eversberg (2017, p. 262).

Certainly, this characterisation has its limits, and relevant divergences can be found between these clusters and the Italian case. For instance, one of the continuous points of agreement between the two Italian associations has always been the idea that the *communitarian* level is crucial for transformative action. Furthermore, some of the divisions between the ideological perspectives of degrowth worldviews in the Italian case seem to be situated *inside* the associations, rather than between them, for instance, regarding the role given to feminist perspectives (as is discussed in the ecofeminism section).

But there remains a certain core difference between the two associations: a somewhat more voluntarist, lifestyle-focused bottom-up approach that concentrates on everyday practices in MDF and a more academic, theoretical, systemic and complex perspective prevalent in the thinking of the AD. This has been reflected also in different forms of action. MDF, from the beginning, was

organised in local circles which to a large extent promoted events and activities such as repair cafés, do-it-yourself workshops and urban gardening projects.

AD also initially attempted to develop territorial groups. By the time of the Third International Degrowth Conference in Venice (2012), the first in Italy, however, most of the local groups had dissolved (often moving to MDF), and the organisation was predominantly that of a 'national group' of activists and researchers engaged in different projects (summer schools, seminars, publications, public meetings, promotion of forms of solidarity/alternative economy, also in collaboration with the Italian Network of Solidarity Economy (RES).

But this risks being a caricatural representation of the movement, and it is crucial to avoid misunderstandings. First, there has probably never been complete agreement on these respective positions inside the respective associations and, second, while this differentiation may have existed to a certain extent about 10 years ago, since then there has been a notable process of debate and evolution of these positions. In MDF, there has been a great deal of work to extend the initial individualist-ecologist position, integrating considerations of the necessity of structural change, social inequalities, intersectionality and feminist perspectives as central elements of a degrowth transformation. AD, in the past five years, has started again to encourage the creation of territorial groups, although, at present, the association functions mainly on the basis of thematic national working groups (namely, transition, community, pedagogy and readings, international, communication and spirituality). In subsequent years, the collaboration between the two associations has become closer. Representatives of both are writing this chapter; MDF was invited to collaborate in the international degrowth conference organised by AD in Venice in 2021, and both co-organised a Beyond Growth conference in the Italian parliament in spring 2024 (BGCI 2024). There has been a widespread realisation that it is crucial to conceive the different approaches to degrowth as complementary; this has been reinforced in the last couple of years, along with an emerging interest in degrowth outside AD and MDF.

Degrowth beyond the degrowth movement: networks and alliances

Building networks and alliances has long played a central role in the activities of the degrowth movement. But what kind of alliances? The width of the degrowth debate and, more importantly, some ambiguities in its Italian interpretation have long complicated this process. In this section, we look in particular at how network and alliance building occurred until the early 2020s. We argue that, from then onwards, a significant change in pace has occurred, partly due to internal factors – such as the role of feminism and increased internal efforts. And, partly due to external factors, such as increasing attention to the ecological dimension of social struggles following the explosion of the climate movements, starting with the success of the Fridays for Future movement, to be discussed later.

Movimento per la Decrescita Felice

Focusing on MDF, before these recent evolutions, alliances played an important role but their range was limited – they mostly focused on specifically environmentalist initiatives, other growth-critical associations (such as Italia Che Cambia) and, in particular, localised initiatives which promoted changes in everyday practices. As MDF is organised in local groups, many of them collaborated with other local initiatives, such as urban garden projects, repair cafés or Solidary Purchase Groups (Gas in Italian), or even evolved out of them. One of the most successful

initiatives of MDF at the national level has been the yearly Degrowth Bike Tour, which started in 2016 (MDF 2024). MDF has focused on local practical initiatives of ecological and/or social change, often in the field of agroecology, but also environmental justice movements resisting projects for large infrastructure or resource extraction. Confronting the complexity of territorial fights has contributed to widening MDF's perspective on social change.

This preference for localised initiatives is not merely incidental; rather, it can be related to an ideological preference for localism, which is strong in the degrowth movement in general (Mocca 2020), and that certainly has been particularly strong in Italy. Beyond the centrality of the idea of localism or relocalisation as a degrowth project, we suggest that a strictly connected desire for communitarian ties has also played a role – desires expressed both by members living in large cities and by those based in smaller towns. Finally, arguably, there has been a latent idea of being able to find in those initiatives a larger possibility of a sort of 'conflictless purity'; of uncompromising projects of change, without being somehow directly in conflict with the dominant system – or being contaminated or coopted by it – but rather operating in *interstitial* spaces (Wright 2013). The contradictory nature of this position may be evident to the reader, and there have been repeated internal debates about how far more conflictual approaches were legitimate and should be supported.

This attitude has made it difficult for a long time to ally, and to be recognised as legitimate allies by other, more 'political', social movements in Italy. It has given MDF an image of being relatively self-referential and, in particular, not attentive to social problems of both capitalist reality and socio-ecological change. While, at the same time, contacts to probably hundreds of localised initiatives were fruitfully established, they were only politicised in a very limited manner due to this voluntarist approach. Still, these developments contributed to the participation of social groups who are not the typical participants of social movements, such as people with lower levels of formal education and women busy with care work.

Associazione per la Decrescita

Associazione Decrescita has conceived itself as a network since its foundation as Rete per la Decrescita (Network for Degrowth) in 2004. The hope was that degrowth would be recognised as an umbrella word for many alternative realities. Thus, since the first summer school (2004) various organisations from the ecological and non-ecological world, local and national, have been invited to collaborate. For instance, the Movimento Anti-Utilitarista nelle Scienze Sociali (MAUSS), RES, the WWF, Gas, organisations of complementary currency systems, and, more recently, the Società dei territorialisti e delle territorialiste (Society of Territorialists), as well as some personalities from the ecofeminist debates. Relationships have consolidated over the years with some of these organisations, such as the RES, renamed the Italian Network for the Solidarity Economy (RIES) in 2020. Meanwhile, other early allies, such as WWF Italy, have taken other (ecomodernist) paths. In defining these alliances in accordance with Serge Latouche's approach, AD's effort has always been to collaborate with those who – despite being subject to some compromises in practices – shared the objective of a radical transformation of the collective imaginary. This 'exit from economics' in the words of Latouche (2020) has been a long-term objective, an approach which, despite some additions and adjustments, is still widely shared in AD today. In this perspective, in recent years, particular attention has been paid to the project for the development of a Confederation of Transformative Local Communities, a project that aims to relaunch and rethink, from below, living in sustainable and autonomous communities.

The early, ephemeral and contradictory popularity of degrowth in Italian politics

We mentioned in the introduction that the terms 'decrescita' and 'decrescita felice' have a certain prominence in the Italian political debate but that they are often used superficially and with a negative connotation. The beginning of this prominence lies in the early 2010s when the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S), founded in 2009 (Pirro 2018), emerged as a new political party in Italy, in the aftermath of the 2007/2008 financial crisis. Large parts of the population were not only affected by the economic crisis as such but were also unsatisfied with the conventional answers of political economy, centred around the dichotomy between Keynesianism and austerity. In this context, the Five Star Movement, founded and led by comedian Beppe Grillo, included arguments from the emerging degrowth debate in its heterogeneous political discourse (Pirro 2018), building on the work of Serge Latouche and Maurizio Pallante (as discussed in newspaper articles from the time – Feltri 2013; Sabatini and Canova 2013; Sebastiani 2013). In this way, the word 'degrowth' was introduced into the Italian political debate, in particular during the M5S's first participation in nation-wide political elections in 2013. At these elections, the M5S came out as the most-voted political party (Pirro 2018) but refused to assume government responsibilities to avoid the need to form a coalition.

During the following years, its political agenda and discourse lost some of its radicality and references to degrowth became rarer. When, after the next elections in 2018, the party formed a government with the right-wing Lega led by Matteo Salvini, little remained of early degrowth ideals. Davide Casaleggio, one of the party's main ideologists, in an interview, argued that economic growth was fundamental (HuffPost Italia 2018). Searching the party's website for the word '*decrescita*' on 19 September 2024, the word is found only in two marginal documents (M5S 2024). One was presented to a participative process by an external association, and the other was a motion presented by the party's senators, in which '*decrescita*' is not used in the sense of a societal transformation but simply as a synonym for the need of a reduction for final energy consumption to achieve climate targets.

Considering the party's electoral programmes for national elections from 2013, 2018 and 2022, none contains the word '*decrescita*'. The first programme makes references to some policies which may be considered close to degrowth, or at least strongly environmentalist, such as blocking large infrastructure projects, and support for energy efficiency and public and cycling mobility. Economic growth is not mentioned, either. The 2018 programme does not mention growth; it contains measures for the 'green economy' and proposes the introduction of a basic income for citizens. In the much longer 2022 programme, finally, the Italian word for *growth* appears 54 times, often as a goal, and numerous measures are proposed to stimulate economic growth. On the blog of the party's founder Beppe Grillo (2024) though, which played an important role in the party's early years in particular until 2015 (Pirro 2018), degrowth is discussed in many posts, as recently as 2023.

The questions that emerge from this short history are as follows. Which have been the causes of M5S's interest for degrowth in the first place? What were the reasons for the decline of this interest? And, what effects did this have for the place of degrowth in the Italian political debate? We can give no comprehensive answers to these questions. They merit systematic research, but we can draft some hypotheses grounded in our role as observant participants in the Italian degrowth movement.

Regarding the first question on the causes of M5S's initial interest in degrowth, we can suppose that three elements were central. First, the already mentioned context of economic crisis and of dissatisfaction with mainstream political answers to it. Second, the grassroots origins of

large parts of the M5S in diverse social and ecological movements throughout Italy – in particular those opposed to large-scale infrastructure projects, be it high-speed rail, highways or fossil fuel extraction, conceived as direct negative effects of a growing economy, including the use of political instruments typical for these forms of activism (Mosca 2014; Pirro 2018). Third, the party's ideological flexibility, heterogeneity and internal lack of coherence – its 'polyvalent populism', as Pirro (2018) puts it – which, supposedly, led to an inclusion of degrowth ideas and slogans in the wake of political opportunism rather than grounded in profound political convictions. This happened in a moment in which the idea of degrowth was having a certain public success in Italy, thanks to Serge Latouche's and Maurizio Pallante's books and public appearances.

Degrowth, thus, was probably never taken up by the M5S as actual theoretical guidance but rather opportunistically as one component fitting into a 'thin ideology' characterised by 'ideological discordance, newness and radicalness' that opposed the 'good common man' to the 'bad and corrupt elites' and that saw itself in opposition both to the political right and to the political left (Pirro 2018, p. 446). Pallante argued at the time that these two poles could be seen as unified by their belief in economic growth; for him, degrowth was beyond the right and the left (Pallante 2016). The connection between 'decrescita felice' and the M5S was possibly reinforced through the M5S's initial refusal to appear in TV talk shows, which on some occasions had resulted in Maurizio Pallante being invited, assuming that he could talk for the M5S. Even so, considering the analysis of electoral programmes, the prominence of degrowth as a coherent concept might have been smaller in the M5S than argued by media and opponents (usually in critical terms).

Later, to be sure, the M5S's interest in degrowth declined as rapidly as it had emerged. This might be related to the often sharp political attacks by opponents to this radical idea but also, again, to the fact that, for the M5S, degrowth was just a piece of a puzzle of an incoherent ideological framework, never grounded – possibly with some exceptions at the personal level – in a profound engagement with degrowth ideas. Furthermore, a general process of institutionalisation of the party's programme emerged as the party approached political power. Also, one might argue, even if there had been a serious interest in promoting degrowth policies, perhaps it was too early: more comprehensive conceptualisations of what degrowth policies might be were only progressively emerging, also in the academic debate.

To be sure, the superficial use of the terms '*decrescita*' and '*decrescita felice*' in political polemics around the M5S has had a deleterious effect on the Italian degrowth movement. While in Italy it may happen less frequently than in other countries to be asked what degrowth is, with many having an idea of it, very often it is a distorted idea (as in the citations from newspapers in our introduction). This can be explained, on the one hand, through the fact that during the M5S's rise, the term has become increasingly used by political opponents and by the media as a tool to discredit the party. On the other hand, the party's own superficial use of the concept may have contributed to this. Overall, for a long time, this led to a frequent association of degrowth with the M5S, so a serious political debate about degrowth was perceived as difficult and risky, if not ridiculous, especially by other political parties, but also social movements. Only more recently, more or less from 2020 onwards, has this situation improved.

(Eco-)feminism in the Italian degrowth movement

Both MDF and AD recognise that capitalism, based on unlimited growth, is the trigger of the current global crisis and for many years they have been questioning how to cope with its impacts and have tried to imagine which processes should be implemented for a socio-ecological transformation of

the society and its imaginary. A crucial contribution to this difficult task comes from ecofeminist theories, which reflect on the relationships between the environment, gender and other living beings. Ecofeminism shows the continuity that exists between the oppression exercised by capitalism on society as a whole and the power specifically exercised by man over nature, women and the living world. This domination stems from the devaluation and exploitation of the generative and caring role, traditionally attributed to women, and the parallel hyper-valorisation of productive work, which tends to be attributed to men.

In the 1980s, law scholar and activist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe the overlapping or intersection of different social identities and their potential discrimination, oppression and domination. Intersectionality represents an important key which allows us to understand the complexity of our societies, identifying the connections between patriarchal, sexist, ecological, species and racist oppressions. It helps us find connections between the various crises we are experiencing (global warming, increasing inequalities, wars, exploitation of workers and so on), crises that appear rooted in a specific anthropocentric, growth-oriented and patriarchal model of civilisation (Gills 2010; Lander 2013). It is precisely from the awareness of these interconnections that a common struggle can arise, a struggle aimed at deconstructing dominant and internalised cultural constructs, and overcoming the factors of exclusion, marginalisation and segregation.

In early studies on degrowth, to many, feminism seemed to be an addition rather than an integral part of the debate. Feminists have, in fact, criticised the limited recognition of the feminist approach within degrowth, and pointed out that, if hierarchical gender relations are not explicitly addressed, problematised and condemned, there is a risk of re-proposing current asymmetries and patterns (Bauhardt 2014; Picchio 2015; Paulson et al., Chapter 29, this volume; Pease, Chapter 30, this volume).

Within MDF, the theme of feminism, until a few years ago, had never been the focus of attention nor was it proposed as an important issue to be integrated into reflections carried out by the movement. The need to deal with feminism was prompted by internal dynamics within the movement, which provided an opportunity in 2022 to initiate a process of transformation in terms of both relations and objectives first of all within MDF – an organisation in many regards representative of today's society and, therefore, not exempt from the phenomena that characterise it. Within MDF, historically women have mainly been responsible for running self-production workshops, leaving men more often in roles of power in terms of positions and visibility. An important step was the introduction of dyarchy – sharing the role of MDF's presidency in two persons, one male- and one female-identifying.

The first steps that brought the issue of feminism to the centre of attention concerned the movement in its internal dynamics, a process that fostered the emergence of the problem and the need for a collective in-depth process of study and self-reflection, which, however, has not always been shared by all members, and was resisted by some. Subsequently, work on feminism has also been directed outwards, in particular during the 2023 edition of the Degrowth Bike Tour, which chose feminism as its core theme. It was during the organisation of the Bike Tour that a working group on Feminisms and Degrowth was formed. The need to create a group arose from the awareness of the intersectionality of the struggles, from the need therefore to analyse and deconstruct the superstructures of patriarchal society and their close connections with capitalism.

The group has been inspired by the international Feminism(s) and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA undated), a network of activists, academics and professionals launched in 2016 at the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest. This conference was the first to give prominence to gender issues and give visibility to feminist contributions. The alliance aims to make connections

between feminisms and degrowth, emphasising how environmental justice cannot disregard recognition of the role that gender plays in every area and dimension of life in which it is rooted, such as family, work, communities, the state, and language and culture in the broad sense. The working group in MDF, therefore, aims to bring awareness of the need to insert the struggle in every space and in every relational context, because, as feminism teaches us, the personal is political and therefore all our actions and interactions are political: there can be no degrowth without feminism (see Paulson et al. Chapter 29, this volume).

Towards a plural socio-ecological movement

In the 2020s, degrowth and post-growth are experiencing a new phase of interest in Italy, similar to that observed for the rest of Europe (Hickel 2023). This can be argued to be the result of several factors. First, degrowth has expanded over the past 15 years, both as a movement and as a body of knowledge, proving capable of attracting and connecting plural political and theoretical perspectives, producing a growing body of literature and gaining increasing credibility with institutions, the media and civil society (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022). Second, there is a large perception of worsening socio-ecological conditions and the accumulation of signs and effects of the accelerating multilevel crisis, such as a decreasing quality of life, increasing inequality and violence, rising temperatures and extreme weather events, the COVID-19 pandemic, wars and the authoritarian drift involving Western countries. Finally, there is a widespread sense of impotence and a perceived lack of alternatives capable of simultaneously addressing demands for social, environmental and climate justice and for greater collective well-being and happiness. All this may have led various subjects to seek (more) radical alternatives to the status quo.

Compared to the first wave of interest in degrowth in Italy, which occurred in the early 2000s, this second wave seems to involve different actors, to be more mature and free of many of the previous misunderstandings. In this case, interest and curiosity about degrowth is more focused on aspects related to strategy and the implementation of policies and practices rather than on an abstract theoretical debate and finding counter-arguments to sceptics, and discussion, goes far beyond individual lifestyle changes. A key feature of this historical moment is that the spread of interest around degrowth is often taking place independently from the organisations historically associated with it, such as MDF and AD. There is a decentralised and spontaneous involvement of territories, organisations, academia and social movements with a genuine desire to learn about and discuss the subject, with workshops, conferences and working tables on degrowth being organised by different agents.

Some examples of this growing network include the joint organisation of the Venezia 2022 – Decrescita: Se Non Ora Quando? (Venice 2022 – Degrowth: If Not Now, When?) conference (DSNOQ 2022), held to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the 2012 International Degrowth Conference (also held in Venice). The two national organisations AD and MDF collaborated with several other actors to bring the degrowth debate back into the Italian academy, and for the first time a connection and alliance was forged with climate justice movements taking part, at the same time as the Venice Climate Camp 2022, creating an exchange between generations, forms of participation, contents and practices. New spaces for scientific dissemination and debate were created with the birth in 2023 of the online magazine *I Quaderni della Decrescita* (Notebooks on Degrowth) (QDD 2024).

Connections between degrowth and social movements have continually taken place in an irregular and decentralised manner. Noteworthy were alliances for joint events with climate justice movements (such as Fridays For Future, Extinction Rebellion and Climate Camps), local

committees for territorial defence, environmental justice movements, labour unions (such as the ex-GKN Collective) and feminist groups. An event worth mentioning was the World Congress for Climate Justice, held in Milan in 2023, where hundreds of activists from all over the world and representatives of more than 60 organisations gathered to discuss common strategies and horizons. On that occasion degrowth was presented as one of the main frameworks of reference, and Italian representatives of the Research & Degrowth (R&D) collective organised a well-attended and popular workshop. Despite this flourishing period, relationships with national institutions, politics and the mainstream media have not improved.

Against this backdrop and spurred by the success of the Beyond Growth 2023 conference held in the European Union parliament, in May 2024, MDF, AD and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance organised the first Beyond Growth Italia Conference in the Italian Parliament in Rome, with the declared aim of bringing the topic of economic paradigms beyond growth (such as degrowth, post-growth and doughnut economics) back to the centre of public and political debate (BGCI 2024). A particular feature of the Italian conference was dividing the event into two days dedicated to institutional politics and social movements, respectively. While the participation of representatives of political parties and mainstream media remained unsatisfactory, the conference was an important occasion to widen the debate beyond the usual public of the degrowth associations, reinforcing links to both social movements and academia.

This phase may possibly lead to new formations of the Italian degrowth movements and a new positioning of other social movements and political forces around these issues. Some changes are already underway, affecting degrowth organisations and their strategies. On the one hand, there is a generational change; the integration of new practices and claims deriving from contact with other movements; and the shared and collective will to overcome divisions in order to create plural alliances capable of combining different identities in a broader framework of change. On the other hand, there is a will to gain a new popularity and appeal to the concept of degrowth in Italy, gaining new radicality and credibility, incorporating debates and concepts thriving at the international level – such as pluriverse, decolonial and feminist perspectives.

Conclusions

The degrowth movement in Italy since its early beginnings 20 years ago has evolved from a radical but somewhat isolated movement, with a very marginal societal influence, to a force that has potentially gained a politically more relevant role in the context of the country's social movements. A more relevant role is not based on the growth of the two main Italian associations but rather advancements in the debate on degrowth, better networks and a greater interest in degrowth ideas beyond organisations explicitly identifying with degrowth. This can be interpreted as an overall positive evolution which has, though, developed through a number of ambiguities and contradictions.

In the first place, perhaps too much time has been spent with an internal, sometimes self-referential, debate between a more individualistic approach in MDF – which struggled to tackle social issues as seriously as questions of ecology and individual well-being – and a profound anthropological critique in AD, which struggled to become concrete for people. Second, a first phase of public attention to degrowth related to the political evolution of the M5S and produced more damage than benefit to a serious engagement with degrowth in Italian politics. Third, rather than an achievement of the Italian degrowth movement itself, it is probably only the increasing urgency of the climate crisis and the force of the climate justice movement which led to a 're-importing' of degrowth ideas from other European countries and, therefore, contributed to

degrowth's new political relevance in Italy. Certainly, there are efforts within the degrowth movement to take advantage of this momentum.

On the upside, the degrowth movement in Italy has expanded networking with bottom-up initiatives and linking more with concrete practices of degrowth experiments. Furthermore, there has been, in recent years, a great effort to renew the movement's approach in particular to social struggles including, for instance, feminist perspectives. There seems to be a new potential political relevance and, in the context of a plural social movement, to maintain an interest in concrete perspectives on degrowth change. In this process, the main challenge is to maintain the radicality of its critique of modern society, with which the Italian degrowth movement started, while becoming a relevant factor in concrete societal change.

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7

POSTWACHSTUM

German roots and currents of degrowth

Matthias Schmelzer and Barbara Muraca

In the early hours of 15 August 2015, some 1,500 people in white painter's overalls set out on an unusual journey somewhere between Düsseldorf and the Dutch border – and this had something to do with the emerging degrowth movement. Leaving from the climate camp, hundreds of demonstrators later reached their destination – the Garzweiler open-cast lignite mine. Despite a massive police presence supported by around 1,000 Rheinisch-Westfälische Elektrizitätswerk (RWE) security guards and the use of pepper spray and batons, people blocked the coal diggers with their bodies, thus shutting down some of the largest machines symbolising the fossil, capitalist and growthist megamachine (Mumford 1967; Scheidler 2020). The motto of the spectacular action, reported all around the world, was Ende Gelände ('here and no further').

The blockade in the Rhineland lignite mining area – the largest source of CO_2 in Europe – was based on a strict consensus for action, which was developed in a broad alliance. Hundreds of activists did not take any identification documents with them and refused to provide their identities. It was widely regarded as a big success, emulated over many years both in Germany and beyond. Many people who took part in the action had not previously had any experience of civil disobedience and were mobilised through the summer school 'Degrowth in Practice: Climate Justice' that had taken place at the climate camp in the brown coal region the week before the action.

Ende Gelände is the first major action of civil disobedience in Germany that took place in close connection with 'degrowth', a concept that, at that time, was still relatively new and cumbersome in the context of German social movements. Only a year earlier, in September 2014, around 3,000 people had gathered in Leipzig for the 4th International Degrowth Conference – representing the preliminary climax of the European degrowth movement. With the Leipzig conference, the degrowth debate inserted itself into a vibrant and diverse tradition of radical critique of growth that has a longer history in Germany. And with the 2015 degrowth summer school, it inserted itself into long histories of oppositional politics, social movement organising and political protest.

What is the background and historical lineage in Germany that help explain these events? What is particular about the degrowth discussion in Germany? How can we conceptualise the diversity of degrowth positions in this debate? And what are potential mutual learnings? These are the questions we want to tackle in this chapter.[1]

While the term 'post-growth' ('*Postwachstumsgesellschaft*' or '*Postwachstumsökonomie*') is more established – which largely stems from the fact that linguistically it is not possible in German

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to construct a neologism in parallel with 'de-growth' – in substance the positions are congruent with the original degrowth perspective (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Degrowth thus stands for a research paradigm, political project and emerging social movement that analyses and promotes a democratic social-ecological transformation of high-income societies that reduces material and energy throughput to alleviate ecological pressures and enable global ecological justice, while aiming at more equality and a good life for all, and which transforms institutions to achieve growth independence (Schmelzer et al. 2022).

This chapter reconstructs some key passages, precursors and roots in the history of the current growth critical discussion in Germany, focusing in particular on the period from the late 1960s. After sketching a historical overview of older roots and the more recent re-emergence of degrowth in Germany, we offer a systematic classification of the most relevant streams in the German-speaking degrowth and post-growth debates. We argue that the German-speaking debate is characterised by a large heterogeneity of positions; the strong involvement of political groups and initiatives around the solidarity economy; an intense exchange with more traditional organisations, such as trade unions or political associations; and – maybe most importantly – a strong focus on growth dependencies and macroeconomic policies for non-growing economies. In contrast to the rather explicit and well-developed invocation of historical roots in the Mediterranean region, and the clear focus on ecological and welfare economics in the English tradition, the historical sources referred to by degrowth or post-growth actors in Germany are more vague and wide, ranging from some authors crucial to the Southern European *décroissance* (mostly filtered through French texts to Germany) to thinkers from the *altermondialista* current, ecological economics, theories of money and interest, and to feminist debates.

German-speaking historical roots of degrowth

As in other regions, the critique of economic growth in Germany is as old as the phenomenon itself, and started with movements and intellectual currents criticising the effects of capitalist expansion and industrialisation at least from the 19th century onwards – from the Luddites to the Romantic critique of modernity (Luks 2001; Löwy and Sayre 2002; Schmelzer 2023). However, the current degrowth and post-growth debates are mainly rooted in the literatures, perspectives and movements that started to criticise the focus on gross domestic product (GDP) and the growth paradigm in the late 1960s (Schmelzer 2016a). This broad debate criticising growth that characterised the German public between the 1960s and 1980s has largely been forgotten even though, in particular in the early 1970s, growth critiques were very articulate in Germany, stretching throughout the entire political spectrum and including discussions within churches and trade unions (Oltmans 1974; Steurer 2002; Macekura 2020).

Growth critical literature – widely read and discussed at the time – testifies to the diversity of issues and motivations that shaped these debates in the 1970s, ranging from the distribution of work at a time of deindustrialisation and continued mechanisation, to anti-authoritarian self-determination, the critique of technology and expertocracy, and the safeguarding of the environment. Symptomatic for the depth of the debate about post-industrial societies beyond growth was the widely read book series aptly entitled *Technologie und Politik*: *Das Magazin zur Wachstumskrise* (*Technology and Politics: The Journal on the Crisis of Growth*), which was published between 1974 and 1985 by the publishing house Rowohlt. Edited by the politician and journalist Freimut Duve in consultation with various intellectual key figures of the international growth critical debate, such as André Gorz, Ivan Illich (both German speaking and born in Vienna), and Ernst von Weizäcker, its 22 volumes cover almost all the issues currently debated in the degrowth

literature. (Both André Gorz and Ivan Illich influenced the French degrowth debate and represent important liaisons between the two.)

These issues ranged from several books on *Die Zukunft der Arbeit* (The Future of Work), starting with a collection of essays by authors such as Joachim Steffen and André Gorz, then publishing Hannah Arendt's *Vom Sinn der Arbeit* (*The Meaning of Work*) and Illich's *Nützliche Arbeitslosigkeit – eine Gesellschaftliche Alternative (Useful Unemployment – A Societal Alternative*) in 1978, to a series of essays by Gorz, Illich, Mike Cooley and EF Schumacher under the title *Leben ohne Vollbeschäftigung* (*Living Without Full Employment*) in 1980, to the book *Frauen, die letzte Kolonie* (*Women, the Last Colony*) by Claudia von Werlhof et al. (1983) (Duve 1974; see also Ullrich 1979). While only partly taken into account or cited in current international and German degrowth literature, these works prefigured central arguments and can add not only historical but also conceptual depth to current degrowth discussions, in particular in the areas of feminism, the role of work and employment, and non-capitalist forms of provisioning (see Boxes 7.1–7.3).

Box 7.1 Quote from EF Schumacher on 'work'. Sourced from Schumacher (1999 [1973], pp. 38–9).

There is universal agreement that a fundamental source of wealth is human labour . . . the ideal from the point of view of the employer is to have output without employees, and the ideal from the point of view of the employee is to have income without employment.

The consequences of these attitudes both in theory and practice are, of course, extremely far-reaching. If the ideal with regard to work is to get rid of it, every method that 'reduces the work load' is a good thing. The most potent method, short of automation, is the so-called 'division of labour' . . . dividing up every complete process of production into minute parts, so the final product can be produced at great speed . . .

The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give a man a chance to utilise and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his ego-centredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence. . . . To organise work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying or nerve-racking for the worker would be little short of criminal. . . . Equally, to strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of one of the basic truths of human existence.

Box 7.2 Quote from Maria Mies on 'work'. Sourced from Mies (1986, pp. 216–7).

If we take as our model of a 'worker' not the white male industrial wage-worker (irrespective of whether he works under capitalist or socialist conditions), but a *mother* . . . work is always both: a burden as well as a source of enjoyment, self-fulfilment, and happiness. Children may give her a lot of work and trouble, but this work is never totally alienated or dead . . .

The same unity of work as a burden *and* work as enjoyment can be found among peasants whose production is not yet totally subsumed under commodity production and the compulsions of the

market. The peasants who have to work from dawn to dusk during the harvesting season, for instance, feel the burden of work more than anybody else in their bodies and in their muscles. But in spite of the hardship of this work, it is never only 'a curse' . . . this time of intense work was also the time of the most pronounced cultural activity . . . in the fields, they sang an endless number of ballads . . . they danced and sang together till late. . . . Anyone who has had an opportunity to observe the work-process of people involved in non-market oriented subsistence production will have found this interplay of work as necessity and burden, and work as a basic source of enjoyment and self-expression.

The same is true for the work of the artisan or in handicrafts production, as long as this work is not yet fully subsumed under the compulsions of the market.

Box 7.3 Quote from André Gorz on 'work'. Sourced from Gorz (1982, pp. 2–3).

The abolition of work will only be emancipatory if it also allows the development of autonomous activity.

Thus the abolition of work does not mean abolition of the need for effort, the desire for activity, the pleasure of creation, the need to cooperate with others and be of some use to the community. Instead, the abolition of work simply means the progressive, but never total, suppression of the need to purchase the right to live (which is almost synonymous with the right to a wage) by alienating our time and our lives.

The abolition of work means the freeing or liberation of time. Freeing time – so that individuals can exercise control over their bodies, their use of themselves, their choice of activity, their goals and productions . . . the right to do many more things for ourselves than money can buy – and even to do some things which money at present *can* buy.

This demand has never been more urgent than now.

While these broadly emancipatory critiques of GDP, expansion and industrialisation, which aligned with the new social movements of that era, were the most articulate form of growth critiques, the growth critical debates from the 1960s onwards spanned the entire political spectrum (Schmelzer 2023). As in all times and places, conservative critiques of growth also flourished. To give just one example, the German writer and environmentalist Carl Amery demanded a fundamentally political understanding of nature (Amery 1985; on conservative reactions more generally, see Graf 2008). And the Austrian philosopher Gunther Anders diagnosed in his *Antiquiertheit des Menschen (The Outdatedness of Human Beings)* originally published in 1956 (Anders 2002) a fundamental contradiction between the fallibility and imperfection of humans and the increasing perfection of machines, putting the critique of technics and technology at the forefront of conservative growth critiques.

More important for current degrowth debates were contributions from the left. For example, in 1972, the German Steel Workers Union (IG Metall) organised a large congress in Oberhausen entitled Quality of Life: Task for the Future, during which 1,200 international delegates discussed the environmental, resource and growth crises as well as perspectives for a transformation that would overcome the focus on growth and lead to a 'humanisation of working life'. Although 10 volumes

document this fascinating event, it has not been analysed in the historical literature and is largely forgotten, even within trade union circles (Friedrichs 1975; Klitzke 2011).

Further influential growth critical discussions were advanced by feminists and ecofeminists, most famously the subsistence perspective developed by Claudia von Werlhof, Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen from the so-called Bielefeld school. These authors and activists explain the social and ecological crises by analysing the patriarchal capitalist exploitation of (female) reproductive work, of nature and of the (postcolonial) economies in the Global South. The subsistence perspective built on the long-standing feminist critique of GDP accounting that had been developed since the early 1970s, which demonstrated how powerfully the growth paradigm devalues (monetarily and in terms of human values) all non-market forms of work. Accordingly, these feminist writers put the activities that are most essential to sustain life itself (those directly related to human needs, most importantly care work) at the centre of economics and society. Key principles of this perspective are precaution, cooperation and an orientation towards what is necessary for sustaining life (Werlhof et al. 1983; Waring 1988; Bennholdt-Thomsen 2010).

Marxists and dissidents from the German Democratic Republic such as Wolfang Harich in his book *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum* (1975), Rudolf Bahro in his *Die Alternative* (1977) and Robert Havemann in his *Morgen. Die Industriegesellschaft am Scheideweg* (1980) worked on a materialistically grounded revision of Marxism for the ecological era. While the official regime and the Socialist Unity Party interpreted the rise of environmental questions in the West as an ideological manoeuvre of the ruling classes, these intellectuals aimed at combining socialism with ecology by reviving the notion of utopia (Amberger 2014). Nowadays largely forgotten – and also ignored in current discussions about degrowth economies – these thinkers further developed their ideas and practices in broad public debates during the 1970s and included cooperative, pacifist and ecofeminist strands into their utopias (Harich 2015; on the development of Harich's ecological thinking from the 1970s, see Heyer 2015, esp. p. 13). Harich's book is widely regarded as the first Marxist account of a communism without growth, a debate that would take off internationally from the 1970s onwards. Again, these works have, unfortunately, largely not been taken up in the recent waves of publications that develop ecosocialist visions of degrowth or proposals for 'degrowth communism' (Löwy et al. 2022; Saito 2024).

The politics of growth critiques and the German Greens

Many of the arguments, controversies and proposals of the current degrowth agenda were essentially already discussed and promoted by the early German Green Party – a fact largely neglected in the entire degrowth discussion and not just in Germany (Pueyo 2015). From their foundation in 1980 until the so-called *Fundis* (fundamentalists) left the party in the early 1990s, the critique of industrialism, technocracy, and economic growth formed a core of the economic discussions and, in particular, some of the economic programs of *Die Grünen* (for more details on these programs, see Riechmann 1993). For instance, the economic program adopted in 1983 (*Sinnvoll arbeiten – solidarisch leben. Gegen Arbeitslosigkeit und Sozialabbau* – Working Meaningfully, Living in Solidarity: Against Unemployment and Social Cutbacks), already claimed that 'Die GRÜNEN are determined that within the Federal Republic of Germany, as in the other industrial nations, there is not too little industrial production, but too much' (Die Grünen 1983, p. xxx).

Highly concordant with degrowth arguments some decades later, the party argued that the 'gains from further industrial growth are already outweighed by the ecological damages' and criticised large-scale technologies, the gendered division of labour and the devaluing of unpaid work (Die Grünen 1983). They demanded a selective reduction in certain sectors of the economy (resource

and energy-intensive mass production, toxic production, plastics, cement, armament and atomic energy) and a focus on those parts of the economy more directly linked to human needs, such as alternative energies, public transport, dignified housing and organic food crops (Die Grünen 1983, p. 3). The similarities with degrowth are striking. Die Grünen also demanded the dismantling of large industries; decentralised small-scale production; a reduction of national and international division of labour and a localisation of production; more long-living products; more recycling; a critique of GDP; creation of more free time for social and artistic activities; the strengthening of cooperatives; redirection of technological research to serve human needs; repair cafés; incomes independent from labour; a just global economic system; just distribution of available work to all; societal ownership of land, natural resources, means of production and banks; self-organised basic democracy, and so on (Die Grünen 1983, pp. 4–8).

A particular focus was the reduction of working time – the Greens even joined arms with some colleagues from the trade unions to form an initiative demanding the 35-hour working week (Die Grünen 1984). During the following years, these ideas were developed into concrete legislative proposals within the German Parliament. In 1990, for example, a draft law stated that the 'goal of ecologically and socially friendly development will take the place of the traditional global goal of promoting economic growth' and that the 'goal of "steady and appropriate growth" is a relic of a phase of global and undifferentiated growth thinking in economic politics' (Deutscher Bundestag 1990, p. 20). These proposals and discussions are still highly illuminating and – in many respects – more advanced than current post-growth debates. However, during the 1990s, the Greens in Germany – in line with ecological parties in most Western countries and in the context of efforts to move into positions of political power – abandoned this search for policies and legislation beyond economic growth (as well as the radical pacifism so central as a foundational pillar for die Grünen) and started to endorse the idea of sustainable development and, more particularly, the idea of ecological modernisation (Nishida 2005; Japs 2008).

Re-emerging of growth critique and more recent degrowth histories in Germany

While not focusing on Global North countries and their overconsumption, the post-development critique has been an integral part of the current degrowth project – and, next to its Latin roots, German authors were central here as well. In particular, Wolfang Sachs edited the now classic *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (1992, with a new edition in 2010), a foundational text of (post-)development studies that has been translated into a dozen languages and predates many degrowth arguments. Building on these debates and emerging out the alter-globalisation movements, growth critiques re-emerged in German-speaking countries in the 2000s and 2010s under different terms such as '*Wachstumsrüchnahme*' (withdrawal of growth), '*Postwachstum*' (post-growth) or '*Ausgewachsen*' (outgrown). While these perspectives overlap to a different degree with the international degrowth debate, they are all not only directed against the assumption of endlessness underlying neoclassical growth economics but also against green Keynesian attempts to bring the crisis-ridden Western economies on a new growth curve through a Green New Deal or a green economy. Growth critical debates thus became particularly vibrant in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 as a reaction against Germany's role as an export champion that destabilised the Eurozone and against market-oriented Green New Deal ideas. Symptomatic for the beginning of the current wave of growth critiques was the 2011 conference *Jenseits des Wachstums?!* (Beyond growth?!), which drew more than 2,500 people to Berlin and was organised by the network for another globalisation ATTAC, which cooperated with many

ecological, development-aid-related and social foundations (Passadakis and Schmelzer 2011; Rätz et al. 2011).

Three years later, in September 2014, more than 3,000 people from all around the world gathered at the University of Leipzig for the 4th International Conference for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity. Bringing together academics spanning multiple disciplines – mostly from the social sciences, economics and humanities, but also engineers and natural scientists – as well as practitioners working on bottom-up alternative economies, and social activists involved in struggles around ecology, social justice or globalisation, this conference represented a provisional climax of the international degrowth debate. It brought into dialogue different streams and traditions of growth critique and laid the ground for a stronger international network and for alliances with other movements (Brand 2014; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2016; Schmelzer 2016b; Burkhart et al. 2017). It also marked an expansion in the degrowth discourse that increasingly includes scholars from the social sciences, political economy and other disciplines.

The organising process that led to the Leipzig conference embodied, from the onset, radical degrowth values. The organising committee counted 50–70 people and was organised in autonomous council structures with grassroots democratic decision-making methods. This bottom-up process successfully put together a massive conference with a comprehensive scientific component (including keynotes, a call for sessions, a call for papers and peer review procedures and a large political and activist program that included, inter alia, art-activism interventions, and a demonstration in the streets of Leipzig against the adjacent coal powerplant. Moreover, numerous other groups, initiatives and organisations were involved in the preparatory process, ranging from union organisations to registered non-government organisations (NGOs) to spontaneous grassroots initiatives. In the long but mostly pleasantly constructive and consensus-oriented discussion processes, something like a degrowth culture emerged in the run-up to the conference – and, to a certain extent, a plural movement actor.

The conference in Leipzig inspired a plethora of initiatives, hubs, activities, organisations and publications on degrowth mostly in German, some of which were also translated into English (inter alia Schmelzer et al. 2022; Burkhart et al. 2020; Muraca 2014; AK Postwachstum 2016). A prominent example is the continuation of the Leipzig conference website (https://degrowth.info/), which has since been transformed into one of the largest information databases on degrowth worldwide and serves the organisation of degrowth conferences. The coordination of the Leipzig conference was centred in the collective *Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie*, or Laboratory for New Economic Ideas) based in Leipzig, which continues to work as a hub for research, educational work and networking with social movements related to degrowth and has become a central social actor in the German degrowth spectrum. One of the most important outcomes of the Leipzig conference were the degrowth summer schools, mentioned in the introduction, as well as a structured networking process with over 30 other social movements and alternative economy currents ranging from commons to transition towns and trade unions. This networking process is documented in a blog and a publication both in English (Burkhart et al. 2020) and in German (Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie and DFG-Kolleg Postwachstumsgesellschaften 2017). Other initiatives include a large network linking researchers, grassroots activists, and bottom-up initiatives called Netzwerk Wachstumswende, and some think tanks.

The first degrowth summer school, which took place in August 2015 before the Ende Gelände campaign as part of the Rhineland climate camp, was symptomatic of the emerging degrowth movement. Even more than at the degrowth conference in Leipzig, the focus was on putting degrowth into practice in everyday life. All infrastructure for the more than 1,000 people was constructed by the camp itself, from the vegan kitchen for everyone to composting toilets, outdoor

showers, mobile solar panels and wind turbines. The entire camp life – chopping vegetables, cleaning toilets, working night shifts, looking after the information tent – was organised jointly by everyone involved. While the decentralised, hierarchy-critical decision-making structures at the camp opened an internal learning space for alternative organisational structures, the summer school was also a place of exchange and solidarity with protests all over the world, from the Indigenous struggle against oil sands in Canada to the Kurdish resistance in Rojava to anti-coal protests in India.

Finally, the summer school was a space for collective organisation and self-encouragement in order to focus theoretical degrowth ideas on a direct action – the Ende Gelände open-cast mine occupation. Neither since the G8 protests in Heiligendamm (Northern Germany) in 2007 had there been so many well-attended action training courses in Germany, nor had so many people dared to take the step towards activist rule-breaking for the first time. And this was only the beginning of a long tradition of degrowth summer schools taking place with hundreds of people in the context of German climate camps, before large-scale actions of civil disobedience, which grew to several thousand by 2019. By the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, degrowth arguments had largely been taken up within the broader climate justice frameworks – and both social forces face the crisis of strategic social movement orientation so characteristic of many countries over the past years (Kapfinger et al. 2024).

Critiques of growth in Germany: a systematic classification

The critique of growth in Germany is a highly contested field. By attempting a systematic classification of different streams, we propose to distinguish five main currents: conservative, reformist, sufficiency-oriented, anti-capitalist and feminist growth criticism (see also Passadakis and Schmelzer 2011; Schmelzer 2015; Vetter and Schmelzer 2022). With respect to this classification, the international degrowth movement would certainly overlap with the last three but also extend beyond them in crucial points.

To begin with, symptomatic for the discussion in Germany is the influence of a neoliberal and conservative variety of growth critique, notably publicised by Meinhard Miegel, consultant to the ruling conservative Christian Democratic Union party and mastermind behind the neoliberal pension reforms. Economic decline is seen as the inevitable destiny of modern industrial societies, a position Miegel justifies not only ecologically but also with regard to social limits to growth such as demographic change, glutted markets and the excessive growth of the welfare state. The conservative growth critique advocates the replacement of the welfare state by voluntary engagement, a charity culture and the reliance on services in the household (which in a patriarchal society are mainly done by women). The critique of growth is thus turned into a justificatory tool and lever for social cuts, privatisation, austerity and a roll-back of gender relations (Miegel 2010; critical of this, Muraca 2014).

The term '*Postwachstumsgesellschaft*' (post-growth societies) was coined in Germany primarily by the honorary chairwoman of the Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (Friends of the Earth Germany) Angelika Zahrnt, and the economist Irmi Seidl. Their social-reformist, ecologically liberal approach, which is closely linked to German environmental NGOs, starts from the argument that the political fixation on economic growth is ecologically and morally problematic. Accordingly, they call for an end to a growth policy, a reduction in energy and resource consumption in line with sustainability goals, and the restructuring of social institutions such as labour markets, health and social insurance, financial markets, or education, to make these systems independent of growth. Whether this institutional transformation would result in more growth or

degrowth is left open (Seidl and Zahrnt 2010; Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2013). By only redesigning specific institutions instead of envisioning a fundamental transformation that comprehensively considers societal structures, their critique of growth is conceptualised in a structurally conservative way.

Neither the conservative criticism of growth à la Miegel nor the social reform approaches aim at a conscious reduction in economic activity. While Miegel sees economic decline as an unavoidable destiny, the liberal tradition of sustainability evades the question of whether decoupling is achievable. In contrast to both, the sufficiency-oriented current of degrowth/post-growth emphasises that a fundamental departure from growth is unavoidable if ecological goals are to be taken seriously, global climate justice is not to remain a chimera, and a 'good life' is to be achieved for all. A key figure of this movement in the German-speaking debate is the economist Niko Paech, who discusses a concrete model of a post-growth economy in his book *Liberation from Excess* (Paech 2012). In Paech's diagnosis, the drivers of growth are individual consumption, which uses a disproportionate amount of ecological space (for living, food, transport, technical devices and so on); the division of labour according to criteria of alleged efficient allocation; and long value-added chains in globalised markets. Accordingly, he proposes an individual strategy of sufficiency ('liberation from excess') combined with a radical reduction of external provisioning through a strengthening of regional and local economies and through subsistence. The key actors of change are 'prosumers', who not only consume less but also collectively extend the lifespan of existing products through repair cafés or borrowing shops and who engage in forms of self-provisioning (Paech 2012).

A fourth current of growth critiques emphasises the necessary and comprehensive societal changes that a social-ecological transformation would imply and focuses on the relationships between growth, equality and power, as well as society–nature relations in capitalism. This stream of critique analyses capital-driven accumulation and the continuous commodification of more and more areas of life, and highlights the importance of social redistribution and solidarity. Solidarity-based degrowth aims at rolling back market mechanisms in all spheres of life, at societal or communal ownership and democratic control of key areas of economic activity, and at dismantling of asymmetries in power and wealth. Key building blocks are commons-based economies, solidarity economies, a radical reduction and sharing of working time, a re-focusing on reproductive activities and principles, and a model of unconditional basic income that requires upper limits for maximum incomes (Exner et al. 2008; Passadakis and Schmelzer 2011; Rätz et al. 2011).

The fifth current is rooted in feminist economics, and particularly the subsistence perspective. Although developed outside of the stricter debate about post-growth and degrowth, ecofeminist and subsistence perspectives are vitally important contributions to the discussion and key sources of inspiration. In their diagnosis, the social and ecological crises are due to the patriarchal and capitalist exploitation of (female) reproduction, of nature, and of the (postcolonial) economies in the Global South. Feminist perspectives on the critique of growth have long criticised GDP for devaluing reproductive activities beyond the market and housework in particular, and call for re-centring these activities, which form the foundation for society and life itself. Key principles in this tradition are care, cooperation and the orientation towards what is necessary for the good life (Mies and Shiva 1995; Bennholdt-Thomsen 2010; Netzwerk Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften 2012).

These five currents are all characterised by a rather independent stream of the debate, only marginally in dialogue with or influenced by the French, Italian and Spanish degrowth discourse. The 4th International Degrowth Conference in Leipzig (2014) created a platform for integrating the latter four perspectives, and had a fruitful encounter with the Mediterranean European degrowth

traditions. This integration was aided by more analytic and sociological perspectives of the structural role of economic growth and capitalist accumulation for dynamically stabilising modern societies, as well as Hartmut Rosa's theory of acceleration, prominent in a research group on Post-Growth Societies at the University of Jena between 2011 and 2021 (Dörre et al. 2009; Rosa 2019). In the years since, these currents have become integral parts of the international degrowth movement and research, contributing to the diversity and richness of the perspectives (Kallis et al. 2018; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2019; Schmelzer et al. 2022).

Conclusion

Scepticism of economic growth and the search for alternatives have entered political arenas all around the world – in Germany mainly under the heading of *Postwachstum*. This practical utopian perspective aims at the development of more equitable and sustainable lifestyles through the planned contraction of the current mode of economic activity, while also challenging its ideological legitimation such as productivism, economism, and developmentalism. Common to the different traditions of degrowth is a radical critique of growth as the main gravitation point of policies, institutional settings and economic structures of modern capitalistic societies.

The German strand of growth critiques has been particularly shaped by the strong sustainability debate critiques of green growth, and by its organisational base in the environmental and anti-globalisation movements. Longer-term historical roots are not explicitly invoked and do not seem to play an important role in current discussions. Nonetheless, a closer look reveals lively discussions from the 1970s onwards that spanned large segments of society and involved not only trade unions but also the emerging German Green Party. Next to a series of highly influential books – most of which certainly deserve more attention in current debates – in both Eastern and Western Germany, in particular the policy and legislative debates within die Grünen in the 1980s are highly instructive. Also, the materialist ecofeminist perspective of the Bielefeld school has played a major role in unmasking the patriarchal-capitalistic logic that sustains the logic of growth and in articulating visions for a radical social transformation.

This historical analysis of precursors of current degrowth debates proves long-term path dependencies, national idiosyncrasies, and separated debates, as well as influential cross-fertilisations across barriers – but even more so the great potential for future processes of transnational exchange and learning. By focusing on the precursors of radical growth critiques, we aim at facilitating the dialogue about a historically grounded and transnationalised degrowth movement. Within the larger family of growth critique, the degrowth movement is characterised by a stronger focus on structural and socio-cultural dimensions of economic growth and engages in a more radical critique of the status quo. For this reason, it plays an important role as a common platform for different types of social movements (environmentalism, alter-globalisation, social justice) and social experiments (such as urban gardening, social cooperatives and self-managed communities). With this chapter, we aimed not only at unravelling the historical depth underlying current degrowth debates but also at facilitating future collaboration in the development of more coherent conceptions that build on, rather than reinvent, debates of the past.

Note

1 This chapter is an updated and revised extract from Muraca and Schmelzer (©2017) – full details in list of references – reproduced by permission of Taylor and Francis Group (see Acknowledgements, this volume).

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8

A CATALAN WAY TOWARDS DEGROWTH

Borja Nogué-Algueró and Giacomo D'Alisa

Introducing the Catalan grove of degrowth

'A Catalan is anyone who lives and works in Catalunya' states a famous old slogan adopted by the main Catalan Communist Party (PSUC) and other progressive forces in the 1960s. This statement aimed to unite Catalan workers from different geographical origins and cultural backgrounds into a common struggle for class emancipation and national self-determination (Balcells 2023). This chapter takes a similar standpoint in defining a distinct way of degrowth thinking that a group of people from diverse origins and backgrounds has cultivated in Catalunya over the past 15 years. Thus, paraphrasing the slogan, we claim that a Catalan degrowther is anyone who lives, writes, thinks, and acts or organises for degrowth in Catalunya.

The Catalan territory northeast of the Iberian Peninsula has long been a hotbed and fertile grove for degrowth activism and research. In this text, we find it instructive to use the metaphor of an olive tree to describe the evolution of a particular Catalan way towards degrowth centred around the work of people associated with the Research & Degrowth (R&D) collective. This olive tree is composed mainly of two main roots, activism and scholarship, which provide the basic structure along its trunk and branches. The intricate patterns of gnarls, knots and hollows characteristic of olive trees represent the complex interplay of historical, social and intellectual factors that uniquely influenced the development of this particular approach to degrowth that flourished in Catalunya. This specific tree has thrived in the diversity of the Catalan and international degrowth grove mutually supporting other trees to adapt to and co-evolve within a challenging socio-ecological environment, whose colonial, patriarchal capitalist driving forces foster unequal ecological exchange, exploitation on a global scale, a care crisis and environmental squandering. However, here, we present the evolution of the academic and research side of the trunk, of which we authors are a part, and offer some brief illustrations of how it has thrived, thanks to the activist and practitioners' crucial presence in the degrowth grove, whose vital strengths have been generative and inspirational.

Those familiar with degrowth scholarship know that degrowth, as an intellectual endeavour and a social movement that challenges Western society's growth imaginary, emerged at the turn of the 21st century, primarily in France and Northern Italy (Demaria et al. 2013; Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). However, Weiss and Cattaneo (2017) underlined that the blooming

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academic degrowth scholarship situated at the intersection of social and applied sustainability studies was shaped mainly by Catalan academics, most affiliated with the Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambiental (ICTA) (Institute of Environmental Science and Technology) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) (Autonomous University of Barcelona). Moreover, in 2019, an environmental sociologist and influential figure in anti-capitalist and climate movements in Italy, Emanuele Leonardi (2019), discussed the 'Catalan way of degrowth' as a key argumentative system, reshaping the main lines of reasoning within the degrowth camp.

According to Leonardi, while this approach retains the critiques of capitalist modernity advanced by early degrowth thinkers – targeting its uncritical belief in progress, equated with technological advancement, unbounded growth and humanity's mastery over nature – it also emphasises that the contemporary growth machine and imperative is a historically specific product of capitalist modernity. This focus on capitalism's systemic role reorients degrowth's transformative vision. It underscores the necessity of diminishing throughput to stay within biophysical limits and abandoning the bourgeois-liberal archetype of the individual obsessed with 'more' and envisions the needed transformation through decolonial, feminist, ecological and class struggles. In doing so, it reframes 'less' throughput not as a mere quantitative adjustment but as a call for fundamentally 'different' societal arrangements. Leonardi argues that this perspective creates fertile ground for dialogue with the classical traditions of emancipatory thought, as it explicitly claims that radical environmentalism and environmental justice movements must re-engage with and contribute to building common ground alongside ecosocialist, communist and anarchist traditions. This reading seems to be confirmed by impactful Marxist philosophers and anthropologists, such as Kohei Saito and Jason Hickel (the latter based at ICTA-UAB since 2023), recently joining the international degrowth scholarship.

While flourishing in a specific historical and geographical context, this particular Catalan contribution to degrowth theory and praxis has been shaped by many transnational connections and influences, enabling it to resonate with broader debates and engage with various actors. However, our goal here is limited to providing a brief overview of a specific approach to degrowth thinking and action that emerged in the Catalan Autonomous Region of Spain over the past 15 years. While primarily centred around Barcelona, this approach has mostly contributed to local and international socio-ecological initiatives and demonstrates potential for inspiring future policymaking and grassroots activities at a national level. Our account does not provide a more extensive and comprehensive examination of the genealogy of degrowth thinking and activism in Catalunya, which is certainly an important historiographical endeavour yet to be fulfilled.

Catalunya: a fertile soil for degrowth

Despite its seemingly novel nature, the term 'degrowth' had already entered debates within Catalan environmental and social movements when, in the early 2000s, numerous publications, events and collectives in Barcelona and elsewhere in Catalunya eagerly explored and discussed this radical idea coming from France. However, degrowth-like discourses and initiatives pre-existed in the Catalan radical environmentalist scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Multiple assembly groups and grassroots collectives, particularly those with an anarchist bent and linked to various anti-capitalist social movements, were degrowthers '*avant la lettre*'. They radically critiqued productivism and consumerist society, and articulated an alternative post-capitalist vision and desires through prefigurative practices in agroecology, cooperative and social/solidarity economies; and through the promotion of a cyclist culture, renewable energy technologies, and self-sufficient communities.

Even earlier, in the 1970s, prominent Catalan intellectuals such as Manuel Sacristán and Joan Martínez-Alier, two very influential figures in Catalan Marxism and Anarchism, respectively, played a pivotal and pioneering role in introducing environmentalism in Spain and incorporating the ecological preoccupation into leftist discussions at the time (Tello 2016).

Sacristán approached the concept 'communism of abundance' from a critical perspective, particularly in relation to the emergence of ecological concerns and the limits to growth debate. He challenged the traditional Marxist notion that communism could achieve a state of boundless material abundance through technological progress and full development of productive forces, recognising their ecologically destructive character (Tello 2016). Instead, he argued that such a vision failed to consider the ecological constraints imposed by the planet's biophysical limits (Llorente 2014). Sacristan's perspective on communism evolved during the 1970s, increasingly influenced by the emerging ecological critique of industrial society, particularly the work of Wolfgang Harich, who wrote a preface for the 1978 Spanish edition of the *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum*? (Communism without Growth?). Following Harich – but critical of the author's authoritarian outlook – he recognised that the idea of an unlimited expansion of material wealth through the unfettered development of the productive forces was incompatible with the finite nature of Earth's resources. In light of the environmental crises, Sacristán emphasised the need for Marxists and the broader left to rethink the idea of progress and economic growth, arguing that any vision of a future communist society must be based on recognising ecological limits that require a more restrained, sustainable approach to production and consumption.

Sacristán promoted an ecological Marxism that harboured an alternative vision of communism grounded on sufficiency, sustainability and a new relationship with nature. His support for a 'communism of limits', wherein the collective management of resources, ecological stewardship, and the equitable distribution of material goods would be central, was closely aligned with what would become the goals of degrowth. Regrettably, Sacristán passed away in 1985 at the age of 60. Since then, a small community of scholars and activists, most associated to the monthly journal *Mientras Tanto* (1979–), have kept his legacy alive (*Mientras Tanto* 2024). Sacristán co-founded *Mientras Tanto* with Giulia Adinolfi to renovate Marxist thought and integrate it with pacifist, feminist and environmentalist principles and objectives. However, despite being one of the most significant Marxist theorists in Catalunya and Spain – and one of the first and the few to significantly engage with ecological economics and political ecology – his intellectual contributions have not received the recognition that they merit in social, political and academic milieus (Tello 2016), nor have their clear connections to contemporary degrowth thought been sufficiently emphasised and discussed.

During the late 1950s, Joan Martínez-Alier enrolled in the economics faculty at the University of Barcelona. There, he studied under Sacristán, who delivered lectures on analytical philosophy to students in the economics department. Martínez-Alier did not follow Sacristán in his political militancy within the clandestine PSUC. Although Martínez-Alier was also politically engaged with the anti-Franco movement, he was ideologically linked to anarchist movements in the Iberian Peninsula and contributed substantially to the Paris-based magazine *Los Cuadernos de Ruedo Ibérico* (Gorostiza 2023), published by Spanish political refugees in France. Moreover, he is internationally recognised as a founding member of the International Society of Ecological Economics and for his critical analysis of industrial social metabolism and the environmental conflicts generated by its expansion. Numerous scholars and activists currently affiliated with the Barcelona degrowth community came to Catalunya to study and analyse what Martínez-Alier defined as an ecological distribution conflict and subsequently became part of the Barcelona School of Ecological Economics and Political Ecology (Kallis 2023).

This line of work examines how the expansion of global economic systems exacerbates environmental degradation and social inequality, particularly in the commodity frontiers of what is often called the Global South or the periphery of the world system economy. The school's emphasis on understanding global environmental issues through the lens of ecological distribution conflicts highlights the connections between local environmental struggles and broader global processes (Martínez-Alier, Kallis et al. 2010). Martínez-Alier's article 'Towards a Sustainable Degrowth in Wealthy Economies' argues that environmental justice movements and the environmentalism of the poor in the Global South are the best allies 'of the movement for socially sustainable economic degrowth in the Global North' (Martinez-Alier 2009). This hypothesis continues to be central to degrowth discussions (Akbulut et al. 2019; Cabaña and Vandana 2023; Gräbner-Radkowitsch and Strunk 2023; MacKay 2022; Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019) which, arguably, stem from the internationalist outlook underlying the ecological distribution conflicts framework. A framework fundamental to the Catalan way to degrowth symbolised in the olive tree that structures this text.

Deep roots in activism and academia

Some foreign students who arrived in Barcelona at the end of 2007 to study and work with Martínez-Alier began to create links with Catalan degrowth activists. The latter, in 2008, organised a March for Degrowth, in reality a months-long cycling tour to spread degrowth ideas, which started from the centre of Barcelona to tour many of Catalunya's towns. With the slogan 'Time of revolts, let's set in motion degrowth', the manifesto of the cycling initiative (Manifest pel Decreixement 2008) declared:

> [W]e live immersed in a model of life that is impossible to maintain, undesirable, and unfair. The current system, based on exponential and infinite growth that does not consider the empirical logic of the finiteness of the planet's resources, is leading us and will lead us to live in an uninhabitable world.

In these words, the promoters of the bike ride clearly articulated the core of the degrowth critique – the prevailing socioeconomic model, based on the accumulation of capital and perpetual economic growth, is ecologically unsustainable because it promotes the continuous expansion of energy and material consumption while generating huge amounts of waste. This is socially pernicious because it (re)produces relations of exploitation and domination based on class, gender and race. Last but not least, the ideology of growth is culturally devastating because it annihilates the plurality of ways of being, understanding and inhabiting the world.

In the context of the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the beginning of the Great Recession, the manifesto of the degrowth march (Manifest pel Decreixement 2008) clearly stated:

> The current financial and economic system is largely responsible for the ecological chaos of the planet and our unprecedented enslavement. A system that creates money out of thin air and, on top of that, charges us interest. A system that needs us to continue consuming, to continue growing, asking for loans and paying our debts to continue functioning. A system that does not take into account the real value of things, governed by the rules of a few in order to exploit others and destroy our environment and livelihood. We want to fight against an economic system that condemns us to precariousness, we want to stop living exploited by a system that seems to have no faces but that we clearly know is not the product of an invisible hand.

A participant in the degrowth march, Enric Duran, later became known as the 'Robin Hood of the banks' for appropriating almost half a million euros to finance anti-capitalist propaganda and transformative projects organised by the Catalan social and solidarity economy. Years after the march, Duran stated that during the bike ride he defrauded the financial institutions in the municipalities they stopped at along the route. Consequently, a judicial process opened, leading Duran to exile from the Spanish state to avoid reprisals. Many of the organisers of the degrowth bike ride were Barcelona-based activists who came from anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anarchist and peace movements. They also promoted the first Spanish editions of Serge Latouche's books and organised a 2007 conference on degrowth at the University of Barcelona, where Latouche was invited as a keynote speaker.

In April 2008, some ICTA researchers and Catalan degrowth activists attended the first international degrowth conference organised in Paris. Greatly impacted, they decided to host the second international degrowth conference in Barcelona in 2010. Catalan degrowth scholars and activists set up strategies to make it a successful event. First, they convinced François Schneider, who had organised the Paris conference to come and live in Barcelona for a while. Schneider was an anti-car French activist who travelled throughout France with a donkey for over a year to diffuse degrowth ideas amongst all those he met. Second, they published the main results of the degrowth conference in *Ecologia Política*, funded by Joan Martínez-Alier and Anna Monjo, to diffuse the themes and arguments of political ecologists and activists involved in environmental justice conflict in Spanish-speaking countries. Third, the French Association of Research and Degrowth Catalan branch was founded to launch preparatory events. Fourth, several educational activities were organised and promoted, such as a two-day workshop set up by the social ecology and environmentalist group Ecologistas en Acción, which prioritised practical examples over theory and examined concrete projects and practices by analysing challenges and successes of existing initiatives and providing tangible insights into applying degrowth principles.

The Second International Degrowth Conference of 2010 was highly successful, with group assembly processes serving as significant components. Through participatory mechanisms, scientists, practitioners and activists formulated a set of political and research proposals that subsequently shaped the degrowth agenda for many years. In the Catalan degrowth community, an approach bridging theory and practice was consolidated, allowing participants to gain actionable knowledge for potential implementation in their own communities. Workshops and courses focused on real-world experiences and effectively demonstrated how degrowth principles can be applied in various contexts.

On 15 March 2011, the 'indignados' movement blew up in Spain. Even if degrowth was only one of the main topics discussed during the city square occupations, the 10 m banner of the second degrowth conference waved high on an abandoned building surrounding the occupied Catalunya Square in the centre of Barcelona. Locally active members of the international Research & Degrowth (R&D) group, together with other activists and scientists, organised several self-training events and contributed to showing why the crisis was mainly driven by the obsession with the growth of a Westernised society, as the manifesto of the degrowth march diffused one year before the financial crisis clearly stated.

Events such as these were instrumental in popularising the limits to growth debate and fostering cultural engagement within social movements and broader societal contexts. As a result, an increasing number of individuals and organisations began to perceive degrowth not merely as a theoretical concept but as a framework for resistance and practical action. This momentum contributed to advancing the discourse on and implementing degrowth-related practices across Catalunya. For several years, various local groups, based on geographical proximity and thematic concerns,

including areas such as education, food systems, communication, counter-hegemonic economics and territorial defence, sought to coordinate their efforts. Despite the availability of sophisticated digital tools and substantial human resources, the activity of these groups eventually declined.

However, the diffusion of degrowth ideas and practices persisted, largely driven by autonomous collectives that emphasised self-organisation and were closely aligned with broader anti-capitalist social movements. Collectively, these groups have contributed to the ongoing promotion of awareness and action regarding degrowth, anchoring it within a wider spectrum of movements committed to ecological sustainability, social justice and systemic change.

In summary, although the coordinated efforts around Catalan degrowth platforms and collectives were short-lived, the ideas they promoted continued to influence a range of social movements, particularly those focused on environmental justice and alternative economies, ensuring that degrowth remained an active and evolving framework for critique and practice in Catalunya.

In the meantime, the Catalan way to degrowth that our olive tree represents drew on the critical approach to environmental social science carried out at ICTA-UAB and made progress in solidifying degrowth within anglophone international academic circles. By the late 2000s scholars and activists based in Catalunya began to publish the first research papers in indexed English-speaking academic journals (Alier 2009; Cattaneo and Gavaldà 2010; Martínez-Alier, Pascual et al. 2010; Schneider et al. 2010). This helped to further imbricate the activist and academic interest in degrowth brewing at the time (Demaria et al. 2013).

Sturdy trunk and wide branches

Since taking root, our degrowth olive tree has developed in response to the marchers' call by moving beyond critique to explore and articulate degrowth ideas and projects. From this collective effort, a distinct community, research agenda and political discourse have emerged (Kallis 2023), creating a narrative that goes beyond the dualistic opposition between grassroots activities and commoning practices on one side, and state-driven policies and political institutional transformation on the other side. An ecology of organisational and discursive possibilities that legitimise vertical and horizontal counter-hegemonic articulations of existing and emerging common senses able to debunk growth ideology (D'Alisa and Kallis 2020) has flourished around this olive tree in the Catalan degrowth grove.

Significant publications with authors and editors either based in Catalunya or associated with ICTA-UAB include the books *Degrowth* (Kallis 2018), *The Case for Degrowth* (Kallis et al. 2020), and *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (Hickel 2020). Edited volumes include *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (D'Alisa et al. 2015a), *Housing for Degrowth* (Nelson and Schneider 2018), *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Kothari et al. 2019), and *Dialogues for Degrowth: Interdisciplinary Perspectives for Sustainable and Inclusive Futures* (Hanaček et al. 2025). Special issues of journals cover topics ranging from introducing the concept amid the global financial crisis (Schneider et al. 2010); discussing its economic dimensions (Kallis et al. 2012); aspects of politics, democracy, and its practical implications (Cattaneo et al. 2012; Sekulova et al. 2013); environmental justice questions (Akbulut et al. 2019); degrowth's relation to geography or urban studies (Demaria et al. 2019; Kaika et al. 2023), and degrowth's connections with blue (sea) economic activities (Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020).

Scholars associated with this Catalan-rooted tree of degrowth have published high-impact research on a wide variety of topics and perspectives, including questions of eco-social transition, transformative socio-political change, strategy and organising (D'Alisa et al. 2014; D'Alisa and Kallis 2020; Sekulova et al. 2013; Sekulova et al. 2023; Vandeventer et al. 2019); degrowth

perceptions, pathways and futures (Cattaneo et al. 2012; Kallis et al. 2023; Mastini et al. 2021; Videira et al. 2014); the limits of dominant energy transition and climate mitigation scenarios, and the viability and need for a post-growth alternative (Hickel et al. 2021; Slameršak et al. 2022, 2024); analyses of the extractivist and unequal global character of economic growth (Andreucci et al. 2023; Conde, Mondré et al. 2022; Conde and Kallis 2012; Hanaček et al. 2022; Roy and Schaffartzik 2021); industrial activity, environmental health and working-class struggle (Aillon and D'Alisa 2019; Conde 2015; Demaria 2010; Navas et al. 2022; Nogué-Algueró 2020); degrowth perspectives and proposals regarding urban mobility and housing (Cattaneo et al. 2022; Cattaneo and Gavaldà 2010; Schneider 2018); reproduction and care (Barca et al. 2020; D'Alisa 2019; D'Alisa et al. 2015b; D'Alisa and Cattaneo 2013), to mention some representative lines of work.

Drawing from both the French *décroissance* and anglophone ecological economics traditions (Kallis 2023; Martínez-Alier, Pascual et al. 2010) on the one hand, and from political ecology, environmental justice and post-development on the other (Hanaček et al. 2020; Roy and Hanaček 2023; Villamayor-Tomas et al. 2023), the Catalan way to degrowth emphasises the biophysical dimensions of the economy, political and historical aspects of environmental performance under capitalism, and alternative ways of organising social life (Villamayor-Tomas et al. 2023). Hence, it is not only concerned with scaling back consumption or production but also with dismantling the material foundations and ideological structures that sustain the capitalist growth imperative while creating spaces for new forms of social, political and economic relations that emphasise equality, care and ecological balance.

Beyond this foundational critique of global growth dynamics, another distinctive aspect of this Catalan approach to degrowth is rethinking the idea of limits. Rather than viewing limits purely as external biophysical constraints imposed by ecological boundaries, this perspective frames limits as an opportunity for liberation and a political and ethical commitment to living well within and through a healthy natural environment (Brand et al. 2021; Kallis 2019, 2021; Nogué-Algueró et al. 2023). By reframing limits as conditions for human flourishing rather than obstacles to overcome, degrowth scholars position themselves against the dominant economic paradigm that equates growth to progress. Kallis (2019) suggests that this approach offers a more democratic, equitable and sustainable way of organising human life and its relation to the environment.

At the heart of this reimagining of social life are practices of care and commoning, which feature prominently in the olive tree's trunk of scholarly work (D'Alisa 2019; Tsagkari et al. 2021; Varvarousis 2019, 2020; Villamayor-Tomas et al. 2022, 2023). Commoning, defined as the practice of producing and reproducing the commons over time, articulating a collective commoner subject, and the situated and negotiated practices of sustaining life in common, offers an alternative to privatisation and commodification in foregrounding collective prosperity, autonomy, and sufficiency. This notion resonates with feminist economics, which has long argued for the need to place care at the centre of economic systems (Federici 2018; Orozco 2019). Care is conceptualised in terms of interpersonal relationships and broader socio-ecological systems, fostering more nurturing relationships between humans and nature. This conceptualisation is misinterpreted if reduced to affection or benevolent sentiment; degrowthers confront and take responsibility for caregiving's challenges, and the sometimes unpleasant aspects of life's interdependence and vulnerability (D'Alisa 2019). These concepts are central to the study of 'real-existing' degrowth, where scholars and practitioners focus on empirical examples of communities already experimenting with degrowth principles in their everyday lives (Cattaneo and Gavaldà 2010; Kallis et al. 2022; Nogué-Algueró et al. 2023; Tsagkari et al. 2021, Chapter 10, this volume).

Despite its wide research coverage, some aspects remain less explored and integrated in the development of the trunk of this body of scholarship. As Hanaček et al. (2020) argue, there is a need to develop a research agenda that adopts a 'margins' perspective, focusing on those marginalised within the growth economy, particularly emphasising gender dynamics and North–South core-periphery relations (Ngam, Chapter 13, this volume; Stubbs, Chapter 28, this volume). While degrowth literature acknowledges global injustices and gender issues, few studies deeply engage with these perspectives (but on inequities, see Parrique, Chapter 3, this volume; on gender, see Paulson et al. Chapter 29, this volume; Pease, Chapter 30, this volume). Recently, a line of research on unequal exchange that sustains an imperial mode of living in capitalist cores has developed into a strong branch of this degrowth tree (Hickel 2021; Hickel et al. 2024; Hickel and Slamersak 2022; Brand and Wissen, Chapter 27, this volume). This line of research contributes to bridging the Marxian tradition of core–periphery unequal relations with the work of Martínez-Alier and his collaborators on commodity frontier extraction and its consequences – environmental degradation and social inequality (Conde and Kallis 2012; Demaria 2010; Hornborg and Martinez-Alier 2016; Roy and Hanaček 2023). This analysis of unequal exchange is complemented by insights from the fields of ecological economics and global political economy, arguing that high-income nations and businesses sustain their growth by shifting costs to subaltern peoples and territories, further entrenching global inequalities (Conde, Mondré et al. 2022; D'Alisa and Demaria 2024).

Building on this critique, the Catalan way to degrowth analysed here underscores the importance of examining 'different' ways of living and producing, as opposed to merely advocating for 'less' consumption and production (D'Alisa et al. 2015a; Kallis 2021). Degrowth is not simply about reducing the scale of the economy but about fostering alternative modes of social organisation that embrace collective self-limitation as a political decision to prioritise care, solidarity, and communal living over individual accumulation and competition (Brand et al. 2021). Such arguments conflict with ecomodernist and Promethean leftwing discourses, such as Bastani (2019), which implicitly embrace the the-more the-better 'common sense' that spreads in parallel with the development of industrial capitalism and the expansion of liberal-bourgeois democratic cultures. This common sense legitimises each individual to mobilise all the necessary resources to achieve their particular desires and ambitions, denying the social and ecological costs entailed. These material conditions and cultural magmas consolidate individualism and competitiveness as the dominant values in Westernised societies.

Re-rooting in the Catalan degrowth grove

Back in 2008, the March for Degrowth manifesto claimed that '[c]riticism is necessary but we need projects, we need ideas, we need to see that there are possible alternatives' (Manifest pel Decreixement 2008). In recent years, the research community around this scholarly Catalan way to degrowth has heeded the marchers' call and shifted towards integrating academic inquiry with policy-oriented research to address pressing global challenges. Reflecting these efforts is the 2022 re-creation of R&D with an explicitly international focus as well as membership. Research and Degrowth International (R&Di) reflects a commitment to bridging the gap between scholarly work and tangible societal impact, employing strategies that articulate new common senses and ideas for societal change. Over the past few years, the activities of scholars based in Barcelona have benefitted from R&Di expanding its influence through educational initiatives, including their contribution to an ICTA master's programme Political Ecology, Environmental Justice, and Degrowth in its 7th edition in 2024 with the online master's programme Degrowth: Ecology, Economics, and Policy in

its 4th edition. These programmes build on the teaching experience cultivated over yearly summer schools, of which R&Di will host its 11th edition in 2025.

R&Di maintains direct connections with educational institutions, local governments and worker organisations to encourage conversations about sustainability and degrowth. A distinctive feature of the R&Di approach is its focus on experiential learning through territorial projects, which act as living laboratories for sustainable practices. Sites such as Can Decreix, an experimental frugal sustainable living house in South France; Can Masdeu, a squatted communal living project in the outskirts of Barcelona; a collectively harvested organic olive grove in Southern Catalunya; and la Bruguera, a post-growth ecotourism and permaculture site, not only are spaces for experiential education centres but also offer opportunities for alternative ways of living and (re)production, allowing participants to engage directly in sustainability, degrowth, and environmental justice principles. Such initiatives have attracted activists and scholars from abroad to Catalunya, who have contributed to the international(ist) character of the Catalan degrowth grove.

Additionally, R&Di members have been active on the steering committee that organises biennial international conferences on degrowth and fosters collaboration between academia, civil society and grassroots movements. These conferences encourage interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral dialogue and advance societal change beyond the academic discourse. R&Di's evolving role has increasingly embraced an engaged and impactful approach that extends beyond academia to public debates, social movements and policymaking. Despite ongoing efforts to translate academic insights into concrete policy interventions, R&Di recognises the need for further work to influence policy and drive social transformation. By grounding academic rigour in context-specific practical action and policy articulation, R&Di aims to ensure that degrowth and environmental justice principles are applied in real-world contexts, contributing significantly to advancing sustainable and equitable alternatives to the prevailing socioeconomic structure.

A 15-year-old olive tree, despite being young, can already demonstrate early signs of maturity. The tree's scholarly and activist flowers have attracted so many scholars from other regions across the world, it is as if they were bees pollinating the Catalan way and massively contributing to its development and networks. R&Di association members increasingly recognise the importance of deepening its engagement with local social and cultural landscapes. As this tree of degrowth enters a new phase of its development, characterised by an increased emphasis on conducting research relevant to systemic change, there is a deliberate shift towards intensifying its engagement with the more immediate environment in which it operates. This is accomplished through dialogue and collaboration with social movements, political and civic organisations, trade unions and cultural associations on the Catalan territory, but also with local governments, such as the one running the municipality of Girona, which has the bravery to explore post-growth transformative policies.

This shift raises important questions regarding the relevance of degrowth to the specific social and political realities of Catalunya, Europe, and the world's core capitalist system. As similarly observed worldwide, Catalunya is experiencing the emergence of reactionary, nativist, and authoritarian movements, which are fuelled by anxieties stemming from the deterioration of living conditions for the popular classes. Therefore, there is an urgent need to delineate an effective degrowth strategy for Catalunya and beyond. We want to contribute to this necessary strategic endeavour by proposing three key areas of opportunity for re-rooting the Catalan way to degrowth described here, situating it more firmly within its contextual political and historical realities.

First, stronger engagement with the Catalan 'defence of the territory' tradition is essential for advancing degrowth strategies rooted in local socio-ecological realities. This tradition encompasses grassroots initiatives resisting the commodification, degradation and destruction of local

landscapes, ecosystems and livelihoods. Central to these movements is the protection of territory as a commons, collectively managed and preserved for the benefit of present and future generations, in contrast to exploitative models driven by external economic interests. According to Sauquillo and Recasens (2024), these initiatives are characterised by their platform-based organisation, independence from institutions, and a focus on addressing specific, localised issues. They adopt revolutionary forms of collective action while maintaining autonomy yet do not entirely reject the use of institutions or political parties. Often, these movements arise as local resistance to interventions of supralocal origin, imposed under the guise of benefiting the common good but executed without regard for the affected population's preferences. Notably, their temporally limited existence enables them to dissolve once their objectives – such as halting a project or preserving a resource – are achieved.

Several key movements exemplify this resistance in Catalunya, each with distinct yet interconnected objectives. The historical Plataforma en Defensa de l'Ebre defends the Ebre River against large-scale water extraction projects that would divert significant amounts of water for industrial use, threatening the river's ecosystem and the livelihoods of communities that depend on it. The Plataforma contra la Molt Alta Tensió (No a la MAT) opposed the construction of high-voltage power lines designed to transport electricity across vast areas from the sacrifice zones of energy production in the peripheries to sustain growth and consumption at the core. The STOP JJOO platform, a grassroots movement founded in 2019, emerged as a response to the proposed Winter Olympic Games in the Catalan Pyrenees. This assembly-based initiative critiqued the project as symptomatic of an unsustainable socio-economic paradigm rooted in mass tourism and speculative development. The platform argued that such a model exploits mountain ecosystems, perpetuates labour instability, and exacerbates housing affordability issues, particularly affecting young Pyrenean residents. Moreover, it contended that the project would contribute to accelerated environmental degradation amid an ongoing climate crisis.

The Assemblea de Barris pel Decreixement Turístic struggles against the touristic massification of Barcelona and its contribution to increasing renting levels across neighbours of the Catalan capital. Other groups, such as Salvem l'Empordà and SOS Costa Brava, have focused on protecting the northern Catalan coast and rural areas from urbanisation, mass tourism infrastructure, and real estate development and speculation. These movements resist the unchecked expansion of the tourism and construction industries, negatively impacting the natural environment and local communities.

Although these movements garner substantial support and consensus within radical social and environmental movements, the Catalan approach to degrowth discussed in this text has not incorporated them into scholarly analyses or political engagement. In response to the accusations of NIMBYism, many of these movements have developed robust affirmative discourses and proposals that complement their resistance approach. This is exemplified by the cases of the Catalan Networks for Energy Sovereignty, for a Just Energy Transition or the Catalan Assembly for the Ecosocial Transition. Moreover, some of these initiatives have gone further in intersecting struggles and geographical scales in their activism, such as is the case of the Boicot ICL (Boycot Israel Chemicals Ltd) campaign in 2024, which has been demanding the immediate withdrawal of that Israeli mining company from the Bages region in Central Catalunya; urging public institutions to assume control of the potash mines, and for all local entities to sever ties with the company due to environmental damage, overexploitation of water resources, poor labour conditions, the company's direct links with the Israeli military-industrial complex, the occupation of Palestine, and the genocide of its people.

Generally speaking, these movements have long critiqued the ideology of economic growth and viewed it as inherently destructive to ecosystems and social equity (Sauquillo and Recasens

2024). The grassroots efforts to defend territory in Catalunya thus reflect the degrowth's vision of ecological justice, advocating for sustainable livelihoods and reimagining the relationship between society and the environment. Together with an internationalist outlook that takes account of the unequal exchanges that bolster the expansion of the global social metabolism (Requena and Cañada 2024), these movements represent a powerful force for change and call for a sustainable, equitable and ecologically conscious post-growth future. By engaging more seriously with these initiatives, this Catalan way to degrowth can ground its theories in local struggles, enhancing its impact and fostering a more situated form of activism and knowledge production (Conde 2014; Conde, D'Alisa et al. 2022; Zografos and Martínez-Alier 2009).

Second, re-engaging with the home-grown eco-Marxist tradition in Catalunya – particularly as articulated in the works of Manuel Sacristán and his followers – can serve as a valuable complement to this Catalan approach to the degrowth critique of capitalist socio-ecological destruction, and to its vision of a post-growth society. The recent rapprochement of the predominantly anglophone eco-Marxist tradition with degrowth (Bellamy Foster 2023; Clark 2022, 2023; Foster and Spéth 2024; Saito 2023; Dale, Chapter 33, this volume) presents an opportune moment to reexamine its possible counterpart process at the Catalan level. Following this line of thinking, Sacristán's notion of a 'communism of limits' effectively complements established degrowth research inspired by the works of Martínez-Alier, arguably bridging the most salient aspects of the Marxist and anarchist Catalan traditions of socio-ecological thought (Luzón 1992). This approach clarifies how our olive tree in the Catalan degrowth grove branches off into a pluriverse of socio-ecological transformative strategies, aiming to have an impact in vertically oriented institutions while contributing to more horizontal grassroots organisations. These contrarian socio-ecologies challenge the character of modern capitalism, which is based on individualistic libertarian ideals coupled with authoritarian state governance.

Finally, and related to the latter point, democratic economic planning remains an under-explored concept in both theoretical and empirical contexts, particularly within the degrowth literature, where it is often an implicit yet critical element. In the face of escalating global market fundamentalism and the rise of reactionary authoritarianism, the necessity for a democratic planning alternative is more urgent than ever, especially when addressing the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and social inequity (Nelson 2024). Degrowth theory increasingly integrates wide-scale and more structural socio-ecological transformations with its traditional emphasis on localised, small-scale and bottom-up initiatives. Central to degrowth is the democratic reduction of aggregate consumption, targeting the ecological excesses of wealthy nations and the affluent classes.

The social revolution in Catalunya during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) provides a pivotal historical reference point for envisioning alternative economic frameworks for democratic planning. In his preface to the Catalan edition of his study on Walter Benjamin's theses on the concept of history, the leading ecosocialist thinker Michael Löwy (2020) argues that revolutionary Catalunya (1936–1937), in seeking the convergence of antifascist combat with social emancipation and the defence of freedom with the socialist struggle, became a great moment of Benjamin's 'tradition of the oppressed' and part of the cultural and political heritage of humanity. During this period, the anarcho-syndicalist movement, primarily led by the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), orchestrated the widespread collectivisation of industries and agricultural lands. Workers assumed control over factories, workshops and farms, establishing a largely decentralised system of democratic planning and management. These collectives operated on the principles of direct democracy, mutual aid and self-management. They coordinated production and distribution through federations

of industries, effectively replacing capitalist market mechanisms with cooperative networks at regional and even national levels. This experiment demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale democratic planning, challenging the notion that complex economies require hierarchical control or market-based allocation, but imply some form of vertical and horizontal organisation.

The experience in revolutionary Catalunya offers invaluable insights into contemporary degrowth initiatives, particularly in fostering key anarchist principles such as direct democracy and radical governance systems or decentralised economic planning (Gorostiza 2023). Moreover, a closer examination of the environmental aspects of the social revolution in Catalunya elucidates the profound interplay between anarcho-syndicalist collectivisation and sustainable practices. For instance, Gorostiza et al. (2013) and Camps-Calvet et al. (2022) examine how collectivised industries and municipal services implemented sustainable practices amid the war, to highlight how democratic control over resources led to innovative solutions in water management and urban gardening, emphasising ecological preservation even during times of conflict, all of which aligns with modern degrowth principles advocating for sustainable and just resource management through economic democracy and collective planning (Nelson 2024).

Consequently, a historical perspective on 1936 collectivisation provides crucial lessons for shaping a planned economy focused on ecological preservation and human emancipation. With respect to the goal of replacing the logic of perpetual growth with democratic control over organisation of production, the historical experience of revolutionary Catalunya – of instituting mass economic democracy – can be an inspiring case study for contemporary ecosocialist and degrowth movements in terms of a concrete example of how democratic planning might be effectively implemented at a large scale amidst the struggle for survival and emancipation.

Conclusion: long live the Catalan degrowth grove!

Since the March for Degrowth in 2008, Catalunya has emerged as a pioneering and internationally relevant hub for the theory and practice of degrowth (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017). Recently, there has been a growing focus on developing concrete proposals and strategies for implementing degrowth in practice and in policies. While traditional research on degrowth has primarily concentrated on local, grassroots, and small-scale prefigurative initiatives, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises the importance of structural socio-ecological transformations that create synergies across multiple institutional levels that undo state institutions and apparatuses to enforce largely degrowth policies and enact equitable post-growth transformation of economic and political institutions.

Degrowth does not adhere to a singular strategic roadmap or formula for action. Instead, it encompasses a heterogeneous field of thought and activism, including diverse approaches to transformation – from radical, disruptive activism, organised struggle and active resistance to approaches more aligned with the social conventions of liberal-bourgeois capital-driven democracies. Therefore, both degrowth theory and praxis must align with the revolutionary principle of 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation' if they want to remain relevant to the historical context in which they find themselves (Lenin 1920).

Consequently, degrowth proponents must endeavour to reestablish connections and articulate a more profound engagement with the interrelated 'red and green' threads of past or overlooked struggles, and theoretical traditions rooted in the territory's material conditions and sociocultural realities (Cot and Guillaumes 2024). Hence, our primary argument is that a deeper engagement with key streams of the Catalan radical tradition of socio-ecological thought and praxis would not

only strengthen the international dimension of degrowth but also enhance its relevance by further grounding it in local struggles and histories.

With the aim of articulating a more situated and socially relevant Catalan way to degrowth, we suggest integrating these three elements – eco-Marxism, territorial defence, and anarcho-syndicalist economic planning – to develop both theoretical insights and practical strategies for a radical eco-social transformation that articulates vertical and horizontal forms of organisations and narratives. Reconnecting with important activism and political thought traditions while maintaining a global perspective will allow this olive tree to continue branching off and more deeply root itself, providing a contextually sensitive framework for addressing the intertwined crises of capitalism and ecological collapse. We hope that such a deepening of intellectual and practical roots will ensure that our olive tree remains a dynamic and transformative organism capable of inspiring radical systemic change locally and globally.

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9

ACCIDENTAL DEGROWTH PRACTICES

Illustrations from Czechia

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Introduction[1]

Degrowth is predominantly understood as an intentional broad social-ecological transformation. This includes implementing various policies, strategies and practices aimed at achieving this transformation (Hickel 2021a; Schmelzer et al. 2022). However, a growing body of recent literature looking at possible strategies for 'putting degrowth into practice' (Treu et al. 2020; Barlow et al. 2022) suggests that achieving just and biophysically sound well-being for everyone is likely to require building a much broader movement, linking many existing practices and social formations that are (potentially) *degrowth-aligned* but not necessarily *degrowth-explicit* (Gebauer et al. 2023; Bärnthaler 2024). At the same time, it requires considerable decolonisation (Dengler and Seebacher 2019) and 'pluriversing' – moving away from the focus on dominant Western narratives towards a 'variety of world-views and practices relating to our collective search for an ecologically wise and socially just world' (Kothari et al. 2019, p. xxi).

The region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is rarely seen as a reservoir of practical knowledge and/or theory for addressing current global socio-environmental challenges and stimulating social-ecological transformation (Jehlička 2021). However, degrowth ideas and the degrowth movement have started to develop here (Domazet and Ančić 2019; Fraňková 2022; Konzeptwerk 2022; IDN 2024) in an attempt to spread the degrowth message further. But, what can the CEE contribute to degrowth apart from just extending it to another geographical area? Inspiration might come from both an understanding of the specific historical and cultural experience of the region, which underwent a still relatively recent socio-economic transformation, and the introduction of post-socialist semi-peripheral contexts into the degrowth discussion (Gebauer et al. 2023; Pungas et al. 2024; Patočka et al. 2024). Moreover, existing frugal practices can potentially lead to degrowth in practice.

There are some good reasons why socially and environmentally sensitive everyday practices in the CEE should be studied, and why theorising about them from this 'East European perspective' seems particularly promising (Jehlička 2021; Cima and Sovová 2022). First, empirical research shows that there are many mundane, ordinary practices in the CEE which are socially and/or environmentally sustainable (Johanisova et al. 2013; Jehlička et al. 2020; Pungas et al. 2024). For example, gardening, food self-provisioning and food-sharing are common and seem surprisingly

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resistant to historical changes (Smith and Jehlička 2013; Vávra et al. 2018; Jehlička and Daněk 2017). In the literature, they are interpreted as instances of *diverse economies* (Cima and Sovová 2022) or *sharing economies* (Jehlička and Daněk 2017; Jehlička et al. 2019), and even instances of *quiet degrowth* (Daněk and Jehlička 2020). Other examples include inconspicuous adaptive behaviour – often do it yourself (DIY), informal and performed outside the market – which help people in the CEE make their homes, and themselves, more resilient during economic transformations (Bouzarovski 2015) or when facing the local impacts of climate change (Ferenčuhová 2022).

Second, what makes studying these practices especially important is that they often enhance environmental and social sustainability and resilience and/or follow some of the degrowth principles unintentionally, 'quietly' and without explicit connection to any specific ideology (Daněk and Jehlička 2020). Simply put, the people who perform them are usually motivated neither by environmental sensitivity or socio-ecological transformation nor by necessity or historically induced austerity (Jehlička and Jacobsson 2021; Jehlička et al. 2020; Daněk et al. 2022).

However, this chapter goes beyond a simple description of existing CEE practices, which could be seen as being aligned with degrowth. Instead, we focus here on the diverse processes which caused such practices to develop, and we argue that practices and ideas aligned with degrowth can be introduced into everyday life through very indirect means. To emphasise the fuzziness, complexity and haphazardness of such a process, we introduce the idea of *accidental degrowth*.

Accidental degrowth is where intentions are unclear and often complex, where the process is chaotic, and where degrowth outcomes can be just a by-product. With this concept we want to challenge, or at least balance, the still prevalent vision of degrowth as intentional and planned. We acknowledge the expanding body of literature that addresses these less explicit examples across various scales and contexts. However, we argue that, in order to understand the interplay and fuzziness of the (un)intentionality of degrowth-aligned phenomena, one of the important but often overlooked aspects is the emotionality of the actors involved. In order to make this insight more tangible, we delve into a specific empirical case, a situation in which collaborative housing models were introduced into the discourse and practice of Czech housing through a municipal-level applied research project.

We illustrate how emotions, values, ideas and needs intermingle in the debates about collaborative housing, especially among municipal and state politicians, as well as among professionals and potential residents (people who are not experts on collaborative housing) who are interested in this type of housing, thus reflecting different ways in which it is (un)intentional and accidental. In the concluding discussion we extrapolate the relevance of the CEE degrowth experience – which is often accidental – to the rest of the degrowth movement and consider its theoretical implications.

Intentionality of degrowth as a common assumption in degrowth theory

The vast majority of recent academic literature portrays the possibility of degrowth, both at the macro-social level and in everyday practices, as arising from deliberate actions driven by conscious intentions. Degrowth is thus framed as a deliberate and planned change in the principles and institutions that govern economic and political life that prioritises communal living, sharing, care, autonomy, conviviality, modesty, frugal abundance and environmental well-being over the dominant focus on economic growth as a measure of human well-being (Parrique 2019). Intentionality also remains central to contemporary conceptions of the degrowth transition. This is the case even for involuntary degrowth in response to economic and/or environmental crises, which, when aimed at overcoming a recession driven by an obsession with growth, still relies on intentional decisions to do things differently (see, for example, Kallis et al. 2018).

More specifically, if we look at definitions, many of them make intentionality explicit, such as the characterisation of degrowth by Hickel (2021b, p. 1105) as 'a *planned* reduction' (emphasis added), or as by Schmelzer et al. (2022, p. 252) as a '*conscious*, radically democratic process' (emphasis added). Other authors (such as Schneider et al. 2010, p. 511) leave the plan implicit. Just as most definitions include some kind of 'planning', virtually all of them assume that systemic change is designed through a democratic process. In addition, at the level of degrowth policy proposals, a targeted shift towards lower material and energy usage to benefit society and the environment is envisioned (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022), including various 'policy bundles' (Parrique 2019). Similarly, intentional political and communication strategies have been increasingly discussed in recent years (Barlow et al. 2022; Stevenson 2023; Strunk 2023).

When we look at degrowth practices, the situation is slightly more diverse. Nevertheless, as observed by Vandeventer and Schmid (2024), there is a tendency for scholars to focus predominantly on those empirical examples of degrowth that are 'intentional and voluntaristic'. There are very typical sector-specific examples of 'degrowth in practice' which famously include, for example, community-supported agriculture (CSA), local food co-operatives, various DIY initiatives, local currencies and the like, often referred to in the degrowth context as *nowtopias* (Kallis and Vansintjan 2017; Demaria et al. 2019), or as *microeconomic degrowth* (Bloemman et al. 2015). These also include many housing alternatives such as squats, tenant syndicates, non-monetary eco-collaborative housing projects, low-impact living and others (Schneider 2018, pp. 16–27), most of which represent degrowth-oriented practices and goals and tangible narratives that challenge dominant power structures. As François Schneider (2018, p. 16) writes in the context of housing:

> Housing provides a public service, as do health and education sectors. Housing can be provided by owner builders, cooperatives and municipalities, understood as an element of social networking, conviviality, good universal accessibility and as a synergy of 'satisfiers'.

We can distinguish at least four ways in which intentionality of these individual and collective practices and initiatives can be identified. First, initiatives may explicitly label themselves as *degrowth-oriented*. This is the case, for example with Cargonomia, a Hungarian CSA-based collaboration with Zsámboki Biokert farm (Strenchock 2020), which openly identifies itself as a degrowth initiative (although it originally brought together degrowth activists with practitioners who were previously unaware of the movement). However, it should be noted that there is also the possibility of *degrowth-washing* – explicitly calling something degrowth when it (most likely) is not (see, for instance, *degrowth fashion* brands (Webb 2022) or the debate around potential *degrowth investments* (Helm 2023).

Second, actors involved in promoting societal transformations may explicitly identify or reveal ideas (ideologies) and values that they follow in their actions, so that the ideological content can be recognised from outside the movement as degrowth-aligned, *degrowth-inspired* or part of the degrowth movement. This is the case for most initiatives listed previously, typically used by degrowth scholars and activists to show that the 'seeds of degrowth' are already in place.

Very often this is combined with the third aspect, political engagement with the intention of changing economic patterns or relationships and aiming for a degrowth-aligned change (again, even without using the word 'degrowth'). Fourth, with maybe the lowest level of intention, are initiatives or actions which reduce energy and the use of materials while democratically improving the well-being and equity in a community or society. Even if the concept of degrowth is not used, and neither its values nor its principles are articulated explicitly as an ideal to be followed,

the outcomes of such deliberate actions may resonate with degrowth. In all these situations, there is some level of intention that is expected to lead to something like a degrowth-aligned transition.

Beyond the sector-specific nowtopias already mentioned, scholars have devoted considerable effort to identifying real-world examples of larger-scale economies, communities or lifestyles that might represent degrowth. These include stable economies in different parts of the world that have historically functioned successfully without prioritising growth (Kallis et al. 2018), as well as 'communities that resist growth-based development or experiences of adaptation to the lack of growth' and those of 'voluntary and involuntary slowing down' (Kallis et al. 2022; Demaria et al. 2019). These examples, however, go outside the sphere of intentionality. And thus, the focus on intentionality ignores many relevant practices and 'needs-based' unintentional arrangements that are, according to Vandeventer and Schmid (2024, p. 2), 'key pieces in the degrowth puzzle'. Moreover, as we argue further, they are theoretically provocative. Therefore, we will focus specifically on these less explored pieces and try to show their relevance for both degrowth practice and degrowth theory.

Cases of 'something like degrowth': untapped potential for conceptual debate

In an attempt to broaden the array of possible 'degrowth-aligned practices', Kallis et al. (2018, p. 415) have focused on empirical projects such as community bicycle repair workshops or sharing technological inventions and shifting to on-demand production, calling them 'compatible with a degrowth trajectory' or 'linked to degrowth'. Meissner (2022) has explored the extent to which minimalist lifestyles can be considered degrowth-aligned. Similarly, Estey (2021) has discussed how co-housing experiences in Sweden align with and support some of the ideas promoted by the degrowth movement. Other researchers have used labels such as degrowth-oriented or *degrowth-minded* to talk about similar practices (Vandeventer and Schmid 2024).

Part of this debate, which is particularly relevant to our argument, questions the extent to which lifestyles, initiatives or practices which are degrowth-aligned but not degrowth-oriented can contribute to the transition process, or whether they are relevant to future societal change. Opinions are sometimes more optimistic and sometimes less so. According to Meissner (2022), minimalist lifestyles that embrace some of the principles and values of the degrowth movement generally fail to challenge the hegemonic economic and cultural order. On the other hand, Estey (2021) acknowledges that alternative practices, such as co-housing, challenge the hegemony of growth within the neoliberal housing market by enabling discussions that value conviviality and well-being based on collective rather than individual materialistic values. In order to deal with these tensions between the concept of degrowth as a utopia and an ideal that requires conscious and planned strategies to become a reality, and the much fuzzier empirical realities, several specific categories such as *real-existing degrowth*, *quiet degrowth* and *everyday degrowth* have recently emerged in the academic literature.

As detailed by Tsagkari et al. (Chapter 10, this volume), the concept of *real-existing degrowth* was coined by Kallis et al. (2022, p. 2) and defined as an 'imperfect and incomplete processes of resisting growth or adapting to its end through tentative alternatives'. The concept resulted from their analysis of the complex mundane economic and political practices they observed on two remote islands in the Greek archipelago. There, degrowth-like patterns emerge in various spheres of everyday life, including shared values and 'indigenous thought' (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 6), that have historically prevented their societies from embracing the hegemony of growth in a similar way to other places in the Global North. Indeed, Kallis et al. (2022, p. 1) recognise in them 'seeds of alternative cultures' as they represent 'territories which, through a mix of geographic, cultural

or economic particularities, have been left on the periphery of growth-based development'. Most importantly, this historical development has been far from a planned and predetermined trajectory. As the authors phrase it, 'the intention therefore was not degrowth, but the result was, as growth-based development was stopped in its rails' (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 6). Extrapolating from their analysis of these examples of imperfect, but real-existing degrowth, they suggest that any future societal transition towards degrowth will require more than changes in political and economic institutions – it will also require a transformation of culture and an 'ontological shift' (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 2).

Similarly, in a case of communities in the Vanuatu archipelago, the way of life and building and maintenance of housing are very much 'compatible with grassroot concepts of degrowth' as they are 'resilient, self-reliant and, in many instances, environmentally sustainable' (Christie and Salong 2018, p. 80). Based on evidence from observing a period of reconstruction after a tropical cyclone hit the islands, the grassroot response was 'organic, evolving intuitively as people rebuilt immediately from whatever materials they could find' (Christie and Salong 2018, p. 87). Similar, 'real-existing degrowth' societies can be found in other, especially indigenous, communities around the world (Kothari et al. 2019; Barkin, Chapter 12, this volume).

Getting back to the CEE and focusing on considerably more subtle elements of what they call quiet degrowth within growth-oriented cultures, Daněk and Jehlička (2020) interpret food self-provisioning, namely practices of gardening, growing and sharing food within social networks as 'nuclei of degrowth society'. These practices, significantly widespread in these societies, cannot be explained as a type of economy of necessity, nor are they usually motivated by environmental values, and are certainly largely disconnected from the degrowth movement. Actually (at least apparently) disconnected from any ideologies, values of conviviality, creativity and productivity are practised 'for the sake of local people and ecosystems' (Daněk and Jehlička 2020, p. 42).

Similarly, *everyday degrowth* is a concept that Vandeventer et al. (2024) use to refer to largely unnoticed everyday cultural practices, those of 'being together on the housing estate', that 'are linked with degrowth and well-being'. Vandeventer et al. (2024) go beyond observing historically formed practices, values or ideas in a society, and argue that elements of degrowth culture can emerge simply from sharing time and space in a housing estate in the midst of a capitalist economy. Everyday practices of living together are political, albeit in different ways from the politics expressed in a movement. Yet they have the capacity to generate experiences, emotions, values and knowledge that challenge growth-oriented notions of well-being. Thus, shared housing (both as a material place and as a practice) shows 'transformative potential in resonance with degrowth' (Vandeventer et al. 2024, p. 71).

These and similar studies highlight three key observations. First, degrowth tendencies that emerge in societies may be unintentional. Second, elements of degrowth can emerge in and through everyday life and mundane activities, attitudes, experiences, emotions and values as well as through interaction with others, communication and/or togetherness. Third, empirical examples of degrowth often appear as imperfect, fuzzy, ambiguous and unlikely to fit the picture of a degrowth utopia, regardless of whether they are pursued intentionally or not. The intermingling of practices, values and ideas aligned with degrowth, and of those that go in different directions, is more likely in real life than seeing an ideal case of a degrowth alternative. One of the effects of empirical case studies, such as those cited earlier, is that they point to the fact that processes involved in moving towards degrowth can be complex, ambiguous and far from clear-cut (Vandeventer and Schmid 2024; Kallis et al. 2018, 2022).

However, discussions on the complexity and opacity of processes that may, or may not, be identified as instances of 'something like degrowth' (Table 9.1) have rarely led to debates about

Table 9.1 Overview of three select concepts of 'something-like-degrowth' practices. Draws on Kallis et al. (2022), Daněk and Jehlička (2020) and Vandeventer et al. (2024).

'Something-like-degrowth' practices	**Degrowth by name**	**Degrowth by compliance with its ideologies, values and/or principles**	**Degrowth by political engagement**	**Degrowth by real-life impacts**
Real-existing degrowth (Kallis et al. 2022)	no	yes	yes and no – depending on the case	yes
Quiet degrowth (Daněk and Jehlička 2020)	no	partly yes	no	partly yes – nuclei of degrowth
Everyday degrowth (Vandeventer et al. 2024)	no	no	no – but actions can be seen as political in terms of sharing experiences, emotions, values and knowledge that challenge the growth-oriented status quo	partially yes – some values and principles emerge through sharing dwellings

the concept of degrowth as it is used in the academic literature. Nor have they stimulated much debate about the epistemology used in academic studies of degrowth – an exception being a recent article by Vandeventer and Schmid (2024). And, while acknowledging that degrowth processes and principles may indeed be followed by people who do not *intend* to degrow, the newly proposed concepts stop short of calling for a revision of the concept and theory of degrowth to better include this reality.

To foster these conversations, we have coined the term *accidental degrowth*, which goes beyond the discussion of (un)intentionality in degrowth theory and practice that stimulated the emergence of the concepts outlined earlier. As illustrated via the empirical case described in the following section, accidental degrowth sheds light on the uncertain motivations, non-linear processes, haphazardness and fuzziness of results, and other complexities and contradictions, which occur in actions that can lead to social-ecological transformations that can be considered degrowth or degrowth-aligned.

Collaborative housing: understanding degrowth potential through emotionality

This section develops our conceptual argument further by reflecting on empirical evidence from the context of the CEE. We illustrate the important role of affects and emotions in the theoretical discussion of *accidentality* and the practical potential of degrowth-aligned initiatives to scale up. Specifically, using the case of the introduction of collaborative housing in the Czech Republic, we highlight the intense levels of emotion that we observed during our field research with local politicians and people looking for housing.

In acknowledging the essential and performative role of affects and emotions, we draw on a theoretical framework inspired by the relational view of emotions (Christie et al. 2008; Easthope et al. 2020). This framework understands emotions as interfaces between subjects and structures

(Easthope et al. 2020, p. 1495; Waldron 2024), between mundane everyday life and the state of exception that triggers emotions, and the 'need to govern them and through them' (Vašát and Váně 2023). We are inspired here by the tradition, based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari, of presenting emotions as *attachments* between different actors (Deville 2015).

Conceptually, we distinguish between affects and emotions, where affects are unarticulated 'states of intensity' (Read 2016) that are transformed into intersubjective emotions that function as sense-making devices (Kunz et al. 2021, p. 1612). In this sense, they are *the* connections, the attachments that form stabilised networks between actors. Focusing on emotions is crucial not only for a better theoretical understanding of the dynamics of certain complex social arrangements, such as accidental degrowth but also in terms of politics. Specifically, different emotions can guide people's collective actions by stimulating their interest in degrowth practices (whether intentional or unintentional). However, some forms of affective politics can lead to disillusionment and create a divide between public and civic engagement (Verloo 2023).

We illustrate emotionality in the degrowth-aligned practice of collaborative housing through the experience of introducing the concept to representatives of Czech municipalities and their residents in the course of an interdisciplinary applied research project in which two of the co-authors of this chapter were involved. We refer to a variety of legal, social, spatial and organisational models and forms that are broadly conceptualised as *community-led housing*, *collaborative housing* (Czischke et al. 2020) or *participatory housing* (Malý Blažek et al. 2023), the latter being the official term used in the Czech introduction. When more focused on the balance between human and environmental needs, it is also known as *eco-collaborative housing* (Nelson 2018) or *eco-communities* (Pickerill et al. 2024).

Collaborative housing is a relevant example for studying degrowth. Some argue that viewing housing as a shared resource and a social good, managed through democratic means, allows for greater independence from the dominance of growth (Savini 2023; Savini and Bossuyt 2022). It offers the potential – and some evidence – that it can tackle social and spatial inequalities, promote resource sharing, foster mutual support and alleviate the pressures that contribute to the commodification of housing. The potential of collaborative housing for supporting degrowth has been widely discussed in *Housing for Degrowth* (Nelson and Schneider 2018). However, it has also been critically evaluated due to evidence of significant elitism in some projects (Cucca and Friesenecker 2021), and researchers have explored how these housing models may be threatened, co-opted, or marginalised by actors that prioritise growth (Ribbons 2023).

Although the concept of collaborative housing represents a relatively open and wide array of models, from grassroots community housing projects to multi-actor networks of cooperative and municipal housing, it remains a relatively niche segment, which is particularly true in the context of the CEE (Pósfai et al. 2022), including the Czech Republic. In our research, we examined how the concept of collaborative housing is perceived as a range of options that involve collaboration and participation in the planning, production and management of one's own (collective) housing. We focused on how collaborative housing could complement or possibly replace the dominant, growth-oriented model of private homeownership, as well as the emotional responses it triggered among the various actors. On the basis of our experience, we argue that if any tendency to degrowth is to be observed empirically, one must be prepared for less of a clear-cut story, for the messiness of human interaction, emotions and a constantly evolving redefinition of the situation in which patterns of degrowth emerge.

Apart from the academic interest, the main motivation for our applied research was political (unlike most of the participants' motivations). We had a strong sense of *injustice* resulting from our academic analysis of the housing crisis that is perpetuated by existing systems and structures.

This primarily affects vulnerable households but increasingly also middle-income households (on the Czech housing crisis, see Lokšová and Hoření Samec 2023). Thus, for some team members, the project arose out of an *affective attachment* to the research problem and field, related to our understanding that the market-based, profit-oriented and growth-embracing model of housing is failing both for those without significant assets and for those without high-incomes. With the deepening of housing affordability crisis in the Czech Republic, where housing prices doubled between 2017 and 2022 (Hoření Samec and Kubala 2024), followed by rising costs of rent, materials and energy, we believed that a possible response lies primarily (but not exclusively) in models of collaborations of residents in multi-actor networks. At first glance, these would involve partnership and support from municipalities and non-profit housing associations, cooperatives and the state, rather than only resident-led housing.

Consequently, we started our fieldwork in the Czech Republic by working with four municipalities – regional centres with 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants (Jihlava, Liberec, Opava and Pardubice) – and two small towns (Psáry and Hrádek nad Nisou). We organised roundtable discussions with local politicians (typically deputy mayors and officials with housing on their agenda), at which the concept and a variety of models were presented and discussed. In earlier communications, and often at these roundtables, politicians expressed *concern* about what they perceived as an unprecedented decline in housing affordability. In the Czech Republic, the tenure structure leans towards the majority of homeowners partly as a result of housing privatisation in the 1990s and 2000s, when the former state and then the municipal housing stock was privatised, mostly to sitting tenants. Preferences for home ownership have been fuelled by its perceived economic and cultural superiority over private renting and the small remaining public housing sector (Hoření Samec and Kubala 2024).

In one of the cities, a local politician expressed being *upset* because '[n]owadays . . . something is really wrong [with the housing system] . . . even police officers cannot afford to become homeowners'. These emotions of *distress* about a structural failure of the housing system were linked to the idea that cities needed mainly young, affluent and educated families for their regeneration and economy. In turn, collaborative housing was promised by politicians in order to *attract* such promising inhabitants as potential residents in their municipalities. Although this was inconsistent with our narrative and the applied research design of 'collaborative housing as an opportunity for all', it gave us a sense of *hope*, especially when some of the opportunities of collaborative housing, such as intergenerational solidarity and taking care of shared resources and communal spaces, were considered valuable by city representatives. We felt that it made sense to continue with field research, by organising workshops and a subsequent survey.

Initially, we believed that we could co-pilot the co-designing methods for the planning of collaborative housing projects with municipalities and their residents, and/or co-create housing policies and recommendations alongside local and state governments (namely, the Ministry of Regional Development, which has housing on its agenda). This would have stimulated the production of pilot collaborative housing projects for the interested public. However, as the research project progressed, instead of providing 'fast solutions' to the structural problems, the local partners lost their *enthusiasm* and apparently, to some extent, their *interest*. The idea of collaboration and co-production with municipalities became increasingly exhausting and demanding. Even securing space in the municipal newspapers to promote project activities – workshops and surveys – often required considerable effort. Such a situation could be interpreted as a loss of interest both because they couldn't see an immediate political gain but also through a *fear* of promising too much to the inhabitants. A similar pattern of initial *interest* and *hope* that collaborative housing could be a

means of smoothly delivering affordable housing, followed by more ambiguous emotions of *worry* and *concern* and even *rejection,* was also observed among residents. For example, the expression of *hope* attached to the newly introduced concept of collaborative housing was mentioned by a citizen in one of the workshops:

> I just like the idea. I think it's a bit utopian, but I like it. I like it, and it seems like the only hope.

Other statements made in the discussion in the first of the series of participatory workshops allowed us to understand why collaborative housing could be understood as 'the only hope'. The participants referred to the fact that homeownership was out of their reach, that they did not qualify for a mortgage because of their age or occupation. Thus, they came to the workshops with different expectations, some of them *hoping* that the municipality would provide them with housing as a public developer. Although the environmental interest in housing was not high on the priority list of participants, the following quote illustrates that the emotional aspect of 'liking' the environment is connected to financial concerns:

> What I specifically liked about the specific projects was that there was also what they call the ecological part of it, just the ecology of it, that the houses can be self-sufficient if you plan this. That just the price of electricity wouldn't upset us [laughs].

In this sense, the eventual acceptance of the 'new' concept of collaborative housing by some of the participants was aligned with a (possible) strategy of how to overcome the system and the structural conditions of economic distress, unaffordability and precariousness. The concept of collaborative housing, with its 'best practice' examples from different European cities, aroused these expectations and even *longings* in the workshop participants. However, the emotional landscape was much more complex, also reflecting worries and fears, and specifically, that such a collaborative model does indeed have a high threshold, possibly in terms of funding, legal barriers and, above all, *mistrust* in co-operation between residents and possibly other actors such as the municipality. The issue of financing in the 'hostile' financial environment, which is oriented towards individual mortgage-lending rather than offering products for collaborative housing, was laconically expressed by one of the workshop participants, who expected conflicts to arise in this type of housing:

> So, that's the only thing that I'm a little worried about, whether I would still be able to fund it, like, on my own. And the human relationships, well, that's classic, that's just going to be there.

Such concerns about interpersonal conflict were widely shared by participants across workshops and cities. However, they were seen as potentially solvable. At the same time, the sense of mistrust in official cooperation between municipalities and the prospective groups or emerging proto-projects of collaborative housing was further deepened by the specific actions of local politicians. In the city of Jihlava, for example, we presented the results of the analysis of all the workshops and the survey. We also proposed specific target groups and strategies for support, as well as potential obstacles that residents might face. Together with the municipal experts, we identified several sites owned by the city that could be used for different models of collaborative

housing. When we invited people to the participatory planning process, a recently elected local politician with housing on his agenda stood up in front of the 'crowd' and made a speech. It could be paraphrased as follows:

> Folks, the previous coalition promised to give people housing . . . but, you know, it's not possible. So by no means think that anything like that is going to happen now.

If lightning had struck in the room, everyone (participants, municipal experts and us) would have been less shocked (and indeed, at the time of the workshop, there was a big thunderstorm outside). This account illustrates *unwillingness* and *distrust* expressed by the decision-makers, which was sometimes explicit, but often less pronounced and more 'read between the lines'. As researchers and quasi-advocates, we could *feel* it, rather than we could explain it discursively. What we did reflect on during the research project, and immediately afterwards, was *frustration.* Frustration at the inability of various public actors with financial, human or knowledge capacities to step in and provide a formal infrastructure for collaborative housing development and also a proper 'affective interface'. In other words, developing a discourse that would *reassure* actors that this could be a relevant way forward and one of the solutions to what people perceived as the 'housing crisis'.

Concluding thoughts on accidentality, degrowth and the CEE

In the hope of fostering further debate on the topic, we summarise here several points regarding degrowth and the CEE. First, as noted by many previous authors, the situation in the CEE is a messy and contradictory one (Pungas et al. 2024; Cima and Sovová 2022). Thus, when we explore degrowth and related practices in the CEE, we often encounter a mix of different alternatives that serve specific purposes, such as the explicit degrowth movement, the implementation of Western-originated concepts like community gardening, and the widespread unintentional practices of quiet sustainability mentioned earlier. As scholars who advocate for social-ecological transformation, we often balance the strategic use of Western concepts with the widespread 'catching-up' approach to promote alternative solutions. Concepts originating in the West are often favoured, for instance, by local politicians (as is well-documented by Pixová and Plank (2024) in the case of local food) and, opposing this temptation, one can make quiet practices more visible, a strategy that Pungas et al. (2024) reflect on.

Obviously, these contradictions are not exclusive to the situation in the CEE. Nevertheless, we argue that the position of always being somewhere in between (Pungas et al. 2024, p. 83) – 'neither poor nor cool', to use a phrase coined by Sovová and Veen (2020) – somehow *feels* (using the language of emotions) different. In any case, from this (supposedly) context-specific perspective, many discussions about degrowth can be more diverse and then tailored to specific contexts, such as recent debates on degrowth strategy by Bärnthaler (2024). He argues, together with Buch-Hansen (2018, p. 158), that in Europe generally we are very far from the 'passive consent' of the majority of the population necessary for a successful degrowth-aligned transformation (Bärnthaler 2024, p. 4). Nevertheless, Domazet and Ančić (2019, p. 121), refer to a slightly more promising 'passive degrowth attitude' based on a combination of 'awareness of planetary limits . . . and a certain propensity for the cultural and redistributive aspects of degrowth among the semiperiphery populations'. Bärnthaler (2024, p. 5) further criticises degrowth scholars, namely D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) and Kallis et al. (2020) by arguing that with the aforementioned sectoral nowtopias they propose, they are unlikely to create a widely accepted 'common sense' that resonates strongly enough with a critical mass of people at any given time. We could argue that the diverse and

widespread practices of quiet sustainability observed in the CEE could contribute to that broader 'common sense' if they were recognised as valuable.

However, in this chapter, we are trying to take a step outside 'context-specific area studies' (Pungas et al. 2024, p. 83), and hoping to stimulate a more general debate about how a focus on degrowth-aligned, but also quiet and unintentional practices, advances the field of degrowth studies in both ontology and epistemology. Our argument emphasises the importance of taking a broader perspective that goes beyond the main focus of degrowth on intentional practices. As mentioned earlier, this shift in perspective can help us understand the experience of actors who are unfamiliar with the concept of degrowth, who may not be interested in it when they encounter it, or who may not be clearly aiming to move in a social-ecological direction. Nevertheless, they may be willing to consider potentially degrowth changes in their lives and recognise their social, environmental and/or economic benefits, as well as the challenges associated with these changes, something which can be framed as 'objective material interests' (Bärnthaler 2024, pp. 4–6).

Moreover, besides the existing (albeit somewhat superficial) dichotomy of degrowth by design and degrowth by disaster, we introduce the concept of *degrowth by accident* to better capture a wide range of attachments to degrowth, and more generally, to other transformative practices. These may result in all kinds of situations, where the term *accidentality* describes the interactions as haphazard, fuzzy and ambiguous. In this framework, situations like accidental organising, accidental commoning or accidental social-ecological well-being could be studied more deeply.

Finally, we transcend previous arguments and concepts by documenting the crucial role that affects and emotions play in these processes. This has implications not only for the theoretical relevance of emotionality for degrowth research but also for practice and strategy. For similar projects to be successful as a political (and economic) framework, the process of implementing them needs to address the emotions that concepts and ideas inflict on people. For example, if collaborative housing is perceived as a distant, bureaucratic and technocratic 'ideology from Brussels', its legitimacy is questioned. In this sense, we follow the argument of Durnová (2019) on the crucial relevance of emotions in politics. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to illustrate all the limitations and potentials of promoting the adoption of collaborative housing models in the Czech Republic, including legal barriers or the lack of infrastructure. What we show, instead, is that attempts to introduce degrowth-aligned practices, such as collaborative housing, can be overwhelmingly emotional for various actors (citizens, politicians, city planners and also for us as researchers). Emotions strongly modulate and influence the motivations for, and the understanding of, degrowth-aligned phenomena and can be decisive for their (non-)adoption. This leads us to suggest that more systematic theoretical and empirical attention needs to be given to affects and emotions when studying degrowth in empirical reality.

We conclude that, almost unavoidably, the processes by which practices, ideas, values and a material environment aligned with the ideals of the degrowth movement develop are fuzzy and shaped by dynamic affective attachments. As a result, these processes are not straightforward, and their outcomes are mainly accidental. Degrowth theory and the degrowth movement picture societal transition as a form of utopia, a form of societal organisation that does not exist (yet). Its materialisation, however, will necessarily be different from the picture painted by theory. From this perspective, the concept of degrowth used in the academic literature so far may be too utopian for studying empirical reality. In fact, any examples of degrowth-akin communities, or empirical phenomena that unintentionally promote some of the patterns outlined in degrowth theory, are likely to experience more or less fuzziness, accidental shifts in their endeavours, detours and even failure. Expanding the academic and political concept of degrowth towards more accidentality to include such fuzzy realities, which are not straightforward, may help to broaden the discussion by

encouraging a deeper exploration of the complexities involved in societal change at the level of everyday life.

Note

1 The authors of this chapter are listed in alphabetical order and declare that they all contributed equally.

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10
GREECE
Real-existing degrowth and its challenges

Marula Tsagkari, Chris Vrettos and Agisilaos Koulouris

Introduction

'Real-existing degrowth', coined by Kallis et al. (2022), refers to and encapsulates a multifaceted approach to confronting the unsustainable growth paradigm that dominates modern societies. It acknowledges that degrowth isn't a packaged theory but rather an imperfect and evolving reality within everyday practices. This concept embraces both voluntary and involuntary actions taken to resist growth, adapt to its limits, or simply live well without it. In this chapter we follow this idea of real-existing degrowth to refer to imperfect degrowth-oriented organisational models in Greece. These practices range from communities engaged in conflict and activism to communities that voluntarily or involuntarily organise themselves outside capitalist structures. These can be territories, often in the periphery in a state of what Latouche (2004) calls 'a-development' (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 2), or nowtopias (Carlsson 2008; Gearey and Ravenscroft 2019; Demaria et al. 2019), which are forms of collective organisation proposing alternative practices (such as energy communities).

Between crisis and resistance

Aspects of the social structure and contemporary history of Greece provide fertile soil for the degrowth movement to take root. The economic crisis of 2008–2010 turned Greece into a 'modern-day study of political, social, and cultural issues during a prolonged economic recession' (Markantonatou 2021, p. 4), which should not be confused with an ideal degrowth case study. Nonetheless, the sharp reduction in consumption of energy was followed by a sudden rise of solidarity-based social resistance movements, including self-organised collectives and grassroots initiatives also referred to as 'liminal commons' (Varvarousis 2022). As highlighted by Arampatzi (2017, p. 2159), during the initial five years of the crisis, over 300 solidarity economy groups and networks were actively operating within the metropolitan area of Athens. Research by Tsagkari (2017) in Greece observed an:

> increased tendency around niches of social movements that can form an alternative model of growth, based on solidarity, cooperation, and mutual respect. Many of these initiatives form part of the tradition that is rooted in the Greek culture that did not fade completely

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> in modern life. This can offer a comparative advantage towards a potential transition to a degrowth model, as many of the ideas this model embodies are neither new nor strange to Greek society.

Indeed, ideas of degrowth are not new to the Greek context. Cornelius Castoriadis, considered one of the degrowth pioneers, drew upon his Greek heritage, finding inspiration in ancient Greek philosophers, and delved deeply into the Greek context to explore what he termed the 'Greek imaginary'. Castoriadis posits that humans collectively construct norms, laws and institutions, forming a social imaginary that defines societal values. Autonomy, to him, entails the freedom to shape these social significations consciously rather than passively accepting them as products of external influences (Castoriadis 2023). Petridis (2013) draws from Castoriadis' project of autonomy to discuss an alternative path for Greece during the economic crisis, one not centred on growthism. Yet, in the post-memoranda era Greek traditional strategies of social reproduction, such as the pre-crisis finance-led growth model and the 'familistic' social model, have become either unavailable or less effective while economic growth has become a priority (Markantonatou 2021).

New growth opportunities, especially in the tourist sector, have emerged through the mass touristification of Greek destinations, especially islands (Prokopiou et al. 2018; Rossidis et al. 2019). To generate primary surplus, the country has been promoting privatisations, deregulation of social rights, and environmentally harmful and large private investments. At the same time, high levels of energy poverty (Halkos and Kostakis 2023), severe floods and great wildfires (Kitsantonis 2023), and rural abandonment (Salvia et al. 2020) are only some of the pressing issues Greek society has faced in past decades. Neoliberal structural adjustment policies (imposed after the 2008 economic crisis and exacerbated in the COVID-19 pandemic) have significantly impacted connections among individuals, with non-human nature, and spatial dynamics resulting in an ongoing interconnected crisis that has influenced, and continues to influence, nearly every aspect of social and economic existence (Mylonas 2020; Sarımehmet Duman 2022). Thus, despite the superficial economic recovery of Greece, the country is still facing a deep interrelated social-economic and environmental/ecological crisis.

As a response to these crises, often in the absence of state intervention, and amid an increasing disillusionment with established representative democratic institutions, several strong social movements and solidarity structures have persisted in Greece. While most of these movements are not direct extensions of the solidarity movements that arose during the crisis, their emergence, perpetuation and evolution are intricately linked to the solidarity movement of that period. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Greece witnessed the (re)emergence of numerous grassroots solidarity initiatives, such as the establishment of a robust solidarity network supporting community health clinics, the development of independent community radio stations, and the creation of a solidarity fund to assist imprisoned and persecuted activists (EP and TP 2020). These movements arose organically as citizens sought to address gaps in the official pandemic response and counter what they viewed as government propaganda. As noted by 'K.M. and V.K.' members of an Athenian social health clinic (cited in EP and TP 2020, p. 158): 'This pandemic is a turning point. We are ready for tomorrow'. Their observation reflects the broader sentiment among these solidarity movements as they witnessed the Greek people's capacity for rapid mobilisation and mutual aid. 'The movement in Greece has very good reflexes', K.M. and V.K. continued. 'People responded very quickly through various efforts, showing great persistence in resistance, filling us with optimism' (K.M. and V.K. in EP and TP 2020, p. 158). These grassroots initiatives not only provided essential services during the crisis but also demonstrated the potential for community-based responses to social challenges, establishing networks of support that extended beyond the immediate health emergency.

Given the chapter's limit on length, we present only some examples of the tapestry of real-existing degrowth cases found in Greece. These cases, although facing contradictions, offer an alternative vision that challenges conventional growth-oriented paradigms. To do justice to the many different examples and bringing in our personal experience, we chose to focus on three categories. First, we discuss *insurgent* cases rooted in climate justice and environmental movements. Second, we spotlight commoning *nowtopian* projects, such as energy communities in Athens and rural Greece. Last but not least, we discuss *a-developed* territories like the islands of Tilos, Ikaria and Gavdos. Throughout the text, it will become clear that these categories often overlap, with many movements and territories fitting into more than one category.

It is essential to recognise that while these initiatives offer valuable insights and inspiration for the degrowth movement, they do not provide a one-size-fits-all solution or blueprint for real-existing degrowth. Each context, embedded in a singular socio-cultural context, presents its own challenges and opportunities but can offer valuable lessons within the broader context of degrowth theory and practice. All within the Greek territory, they represent microcosms of the tensions between growth-oriented policies and the ideas of degrowth.

Degrowth and the contemporary climate and ecological movements in Greece

Insurgent territories emerge as a response to environmental violence, neo-extractivism, resource appropriation, land grabbing and commodification. Often insurgent movements and territories centre the environment and identify as part of the broader and global environmental movement active in areas of (environmental) conflict. According to Müller (2020, p. 119):

> Climate justice is not so much a state of affairs – e.g. the fair distribution of the costs of a potential solution to the climate crisis – but more a process, namely the process of struggling against the social structures which cause climate injustice. If we heed this broad definition, we can even say that many of the struggles for climate justice are not necessarily being fought under the banner of climate justice, but are represented as struggles for land, water, and other basic needs and human rights.

Even though we believe that the term 'climate and ecological justice movement' is more appropriate, since the word 'environment' creates a distance between humans and nature, which goes to the core of the crisis we are facing, we consciously use the term 'environmental movement' here, since this is how it's described in Greece.

In order to understand the current state of the environmental movement in Greece, and its role as an insurgent real-existing degrowth example, we need to look back at the financial crisis of 2008, and the austerity measures and privatisations that followed. The financial crisis resulted in a detrimental loss in Greece's gross domestic product (GDP), which is not an example of 'degrowth' – as some opponents of degrowth claim, making a flawed correlation to discredit degrowth. The financial crisis and the austerity measures enforced in Greece were a violent and sustained top-down impoverishment of the Greek population as a result of tremendously unpopular policies. The European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund adjustment programmes had a significant impact on middle- and lower-income classes, increasing precariousness and unemployment, and deepened inequality (Forster et al. 2019), while also creating an environment of fear and insecurity (Davey 2015). At the same time, they had severe ecological impacts, increasing the country's vulnerability to climate change (Botetzagias et al. 2018). These policies don't refer to degrowth,

which is a truly democratic process where citizens collectively decide to position social justice at the core of their policymaking, while transitioning to an economy that respects the ecological boundaries and is not solely focused on GDP growth.

Ruling parties often employ the climate crisis as a convenient excuse during climate disasters, while corporations leverage it for greenwashing and financial gain, exacerbating distrust among citizens (van Versendaal 2023). The climate justice movement is organised and loud in Europe but less prevalent in Greece (Gkiouzepas and Botetzagias 2018). Greek environmental groups often critique growth and green-growth strategies usually without explicitly mentioning the climate crisis (Kafetzis 2023), or aligning with the climate justice, or degrowth principles. Greek environmental movements are primarily rooted in leftist or anarchist ideologies (Keith and Tsakatika 2023). Despite a recent increased interest, many collectives struggle to effectively communicate the climate crisis within its socioeconomic framework due to systemic failures and government exploitation (Kafetzis 2023).

Opposition to industrial wind farms

The most potent force in environmental advocacy today lies in opposition to industrial wind farms, where a robust network of organising has yielded substantial victories, mostly through the judicial system (Komninou et al. 2023). Big projects have been cancelled by the Council of State, Greece's highest administrative court. The movement of opposition to wind farms has several different views, from climate crisis denialism and the NIMBY ('not in my backyard') reaction/movement to anticapitalist and strong degrowth and climate justice voices. The majority focus on biodiversity loss and land use change as a consequence of industrial wind farms but rarely mention the climate crisis, not necessarily because they don't acknowledge climate change.

Greece is a place of an intriguing contradiction demonstrating the undesirable outcome produced when a central authority claims to implement an environmental policy but does not fuse it with a complementary social policy. Alternative energy sources like wind and solar are usually considered more compatible than energy systems based on coal, oil and nuclear power in a democratic egalitarian society (Winner 1980; Becker and Naumann 2017). People active in social movements are natural proponents and allies in the creation of a more egalitarian and democratic society and are often in movements against alternative energy sources. These technologies have been implemented in distorted ways in Greece – in a top-down and destructive manner, often in Natura 2000 protected areas, weaponising the climate crisis, and without benefits for – or prior, free, and informed consent by – local communities (Zafeiropoulos 2024). A different model, based on the vision of degrowth and self-sufficiency, could have different results and responses by the public. Books written by Giorgios Kolempas (*Γιώργος Κολέμπας*) and Giannis Mpillas (*Γιάννης Μπίλλας)* are popular within the environmental movement, Mpillas and Kolempas (2013, 2019) expanding on subjects such as degrowth, the commons, self-sufficiency, communalism and direct democracy.

Insurgent territories and radical geographies

The environmental movement has a strong presence in other realms as well (see Koulouris (2024) for details). Currently, in Greece's two largest cities of Athens and Thessaloniki, there are assemblies organising around public spaces and resisting gentrification. Oil and gas exploitation is becoming a bigger struggle, since many offshore and onshore blocks have been leased and the extraction phase could start soon in Epirus and Crete (Ibrahim 2019). A network known as

'Hellenic Trench SOS' (Ελληνική *Τάφρος SOS*) has emerged to combat proposed fossil fuel extraction blocks in the Hellenic (Greek) trench. This trench harbours the deepest point in the Mediterranean Sea, crucial for the reproduction of wildlife within its ecosystem.

A monumental moment for the contemporary (post-2008) environmental movement has been the fight against gold and copper mining by Eldorado Gold, a Canadian mining company, in Skouries, Chalkidiki (Blionis 2015). The first permit granted in 2011 led to clashes with riot police in the years that followed. This local organising effort garnered national and international attention (visited by Naomi Klein in 2013) and solidarity from various grassroots movements, transcending environmental concerns to confront capitalist interests. Although the Skouries movement has been unsuccessful in stopping the mining until now (writing in 2024), it remains an important moment that mobilised thousands of people who met with violent repression unseen before in environmental struggles (Hofkirchner et al. 2015).

Degrowth emerged as a central concept embraced by numerous participants in the Skouries conflict, especially by the Epitropi Agona Megalis Panagias assembly (*Επιτροπή Αγώνα Μεγάλης Παναγίας*) as it encapsulated the shared idea of challenging the prevailing paradigm of ceaseless economic expansion and fighting against capitalist interests that drive natural resource exploitation and environmental injustice (Kallis 2012). Another noteworthy endeavour, celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2023, is the Vio.Me Cooperative (*Σ.Ε. BIO.ME*), a self-managed factory in Thessaloniki that produces environmentally friendly cleaning products. The initiative was started by workers after the owners had failed to pay salaries, the case for many workers in the post-2008 financial crisis.

Another milestone for the Greek environmental justice movement was in 2020, when the so-called Modernization of the Environmental Law bill was passed. At that moment, more than 150 collectives mobilised all over Greece for months, with more than 5,000 people protesting on Syntagma Square on World Environment Day. This turnout represented an unprecedented opposition to environmental legislation (Bechlivanis 2020). During that period Agrypnoi Polites (*Άγρυπνοι Πολίτες*) was formed as an open assembly that congregated in front of the parliament every night until dawn for 62 consecutive days. Climate justice and degrowth were central in their messaging. At that time Support Art Workers, an arts professionals movement demanding better pay and equal treatment from the state, decided to form a new group, Support Earth, to protest the environment law. This was an important sign of more intersectional approaches appearing in environmental struggles in Greece. By opposing laws that prioritise economic growth over environmental protection, these movements advocate for a shift away from the dominant paradigm of endless expansion and symbolise a commitment to continuous engagement and resistance against policies endangering ecological balance.

In 2023, the massive wildfire in Evros and floods in Thessaly – one of the most significant rainfall-induced floods in Europe since records began – played a pivotal role in increasing public interest in climate crisis impacts. Wildfires are easily attributed to negligence, power line failures, or more nefarious causes like arson, but rainfall amounting to two years' worth of rain in just two days is difficult not to attribute to climate change. Simultaneously, the environmental movement is striving to link these disasters to social justice issues and the destructive agenda driven by growth that benefits only a few (Kafetzis 2023).

Recent efforts to prioritise climate justice (*κλιματική δικαιοσύνη*) and degrowth (*αποανάπτυξη*) are exemplified by initiatives such as the annual Climate Justice Camp (*Καμπ Κλιματικής Δικαιοσύνης*), established in 2022, and planned to be held in a different location in Greece each year. In 2024, an informal group emerged from a series of educational activities organised by the non-government organisation (NGO) Inter Alia, which received support from the Research &

Degrowth lab (Barcelona) to enhance their learning and organising capacity. Consequently, Let's Talk About Degrowth Greece plans to arrange actions and dialogues with different stakeholders on degrowth as well as initiating a degrowth library.

Other examples of collectives that talk explicitly about degrowth and embrace degrowth ideas are Climataria (*Κλιματαριά*), an intersectional activist assembly for climate and social justice launched in Athens in 2023; Apo Koinou (*Από Κοινού*), a collective and network in Trikala that focuses on the commons, mutual aid, self-sufficiency and direct democracy; Stagiates (*Σταγιάτες*), a small village in Volos with strong local organising against water privatisation that has held a quarterly national assembly for degrowth for three years; Aftenergia (*Αυτενέργεια*), a self-organised collective that focuses on social ecology and autonomy; Save Gavdos (*Πρωτοβουλία Παραθεριστ(ρι)ών Γαύδου*), an assembly that started in 2021 against water privatisation, destruction of hand-made shelters, prohibition of nudism, oil drilling, and growth-oriented touristification of the island of Gavdos.

The case of Epirus

The region of Epirus in Western Greece deserves a special mention due to the many promising initiatives located there that explicitly or indirectly espouse degrowth arguments. This region is at the forefront of ecological struggles in Greece as the location of all the approved necessary permits for oil and gas extraction. The only existing fossil fuel extraction site is Prinos, which has been exploited since 1974. Activists are worried that if the exploitation plans for Epirus are realised, then many onshore and offshore blocks currently leased in regions like Crete and the Ionian Sea will follow. Furthermore, many industrial wind and solar energy projects are taking place in Epirus.

Significant activists include the P2P Lab, an interdisciplinary research collective focused on the commons, launching various projects, such as Tzoumakers (*Τζουμέικερς*), an open lab for communities to cooperatively design and manufacture tools for small-scale agricultural production; Koino Kalo (*Κοινό Κ.Αλ.Ο*), a network of Social and Solidarity Economy organisations consisting of 16 projects, such as The High Mountains (*Τα ψηλά βουνά)*, which promotes decentralisation and repopulation of mountainous regions; Epirus Against Oil & Gas (*Ήπειρος Κατά Των Εξορύξεων)* and Save Epirus (*Σώστε Την Ήπειρο)*, which are movements fighting against the imminent threat of fossil fuel exploitation; the Open Assembly In Ioannina Against Energy Exploitation (*Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση στα Γιάννενα ενάντια στην Ενεργειακή Λεηλασία)*, a grassroots assembly fighting against a variety of energy projects in the region; Chironomia Antiexousiastiki Kinisi (*Χειρονομία Αντιεξουσιαστική Κίνηση*), an anti-authoritarian anarchist collective in Ioannina.

All these cases in Greece's contemporary environmental movement demonstrate the fertile ground, especially within degrowth and climate justice movements, for a strong degrowth vision with an intersectional approach to act as connective tissue among the movements.

Greek energy communities as nowtopias

Greece offers an interesting territory to study different forms and organisations of real-existing degrowth. On one hand, the country's topography comprises numerous isolated islands and mountainous villages, many of which confront significant levels of isolation and have been marginalised within the prevailing development paradigm. Additionally, Greece's advantageous wind and sun conditions present a promising opportunity for the expansion of renewable energy sources.

The abundance of sunlight and consistent wind patterns across the country's landscape offer a fertile ground for the development and utilisation of solar and wind power technologies (Panagopoulou 2023). However, the growth of renewable energy projects often raises concerns regarding extractivism, as local ecosystems and communities may be exploited for resources (Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2022). Land grabbing can arise as developers seek prime locations for renewable installations, leading to displacement of local populations and loss of agricultural land (Scheidel et al. 2023). While the emergence of renewable energy technologies is a positive development for minimising carbon emissions, they have yet to significantly replace fossil fuel dependency and have often been added to an already fossil-dominated energy mix (York and Bell 2019). Degrowth solutions to the challenges of renewable energy expansion and fossil fuel dependency include prioritising energy sufficiency, promoting community-led and localised energy initiatives, integrating social justice into energy transitions, limiting extractive practices, reducing energy demand and transforming or abolishing energy-intensive sectors.

Energy communities represent a promising model for navigating the complex challenges of renewable energy transition. While acknowledging the material limitations and extractive processes behind renewable technologies, these grassroots initiatives demonstrate how local, democratically managed energy systems can help reduce overall consumption while ensuring fair distribution. Unlike large-scale corporate renewable projects that often perpetuate extractivism and distant resource exploitation, energy communities typically operate at a scale that matches local capacities. Rather than simply substituting renewable technologies for fossil fuels while maintaining current consumption patterns, in line with degrowth, energy communities argue for reducing overall energy demand, redesigning cities for lower consumption, shortening supply chains, and prioritising essential needs over endless economic expansion (Wahlund and Palm 2022; Vrettos et al. 2024).

The case for energy communities

From the first cooperatively owned electricity grids in Germany, in the early 20th century, community energy marks a long history in Europe. REScoop.eu, the European Federation of Citizen Energy Cooperatives, counts more than 2,500 members, representing over 2 million EU citizens (see Huybrechts and Haugh 2018). Following years of persistent activist pressure, the European Commission with its landmark 2018 Clean Energy for all Europeans Package of Directives, officially recognised the right of citizens to co-create local renewable energy projects. In fact, 'energy communities' were introduced as legal entities that prioritise social and environmental goals, and not private profit. Buoyed by official legislative recognition and the energy crisis of 2022–2023, the community energy movement witnessed exponential growth in the five years to 2024. In Belgium 5 per cent of all renewable energy capacity stems from cooperatives, which recently won the right to participate in the first offshore wind tenders to take place in the country in 2025 (REScoop 2023). In Denmark, 75 per cent of all district heating projects are owned by cooperatives. Across the bloc, by 2050, one in two citizens could be producing their own energy (Kampman 2016).

Highlighted in the doughnut vision of REScoop (2021), energy communities are a natural fit for a post-growth economy. They strive to reduce their members' resources and energy. Studies show that membership in an energy community can lead to energy demand reduction, through activities like deep housing renovations, or awareness campaigns (Barnes et al. 2022). While this does not align consumption patterns with those suggested by science as necessary to stay on track with the 1.5°C target, it creates a springboard upon which energy communities can push for deeper sufficiency policies.

Beyond their material impact, energy communities offer intangible social and cultural effects. They usually operate under a 'one member equals one vote' principle, emphasising direct democratic participation, while centring diverse and structurally underrepresented voices (Vrettos 2021). These communities typically prioritise renewable, small-scale energy sources, energy efficiency, collective ownership and democratic decision-making processes (Vrettos 2021). These nowtopias can be found between the rock of proposed oil and gas drilling, and the hard place of large-scale private wind projects. Alternative energy sources like wind and solar, are usually considered to be more compatible with a democratic, egalitarian society than energy systems based on coal, oil and nuclear power (Winner 1980).

The northern Epirus region of Greece is a telling example of the inherent contradictions in the country's energy transition. Positioned in an area faced with the cruel (and false) dichotomies of growth, CommonEn energy community in Ioannina offers a third way – a pluralistic, democratic, renewable energy future. By 2024 the community had developed two 100 kWp solar parks for collective self-consumption and was developing the country's first *community-led agri-voltaic* project. It was collaborating with other actors within the local social economy, co-organising political events centred around the commons, post-growth, and participatory policymaking (Katsanouli 2024). These events include convivial workshops to co-design low-tech solutions like a small wooden wind turbine, and strategy meetings to discuss how to enhance the commons-based economy in the broader region, including in sectors such as agriculture.

In the metropolis of Athens, a net importer of energy, land and materials where almost half of the country's population lives, citizens have founded various energy communities to promote localised, wind and solar energy production. Amongst them, Hyperion, Collective Energy, and Solarity stand out. All three communities have developed collective solar parks for self-consumption, guided by principles of sufficiency, and have dedicated a portion of their total energy production for free to social NGOs, and energy-vulnerable households (Kalaitzi 2024; Katsanouli 2024).

Aligning energy communities with degrowth: from practice to purpose

Buoyed by the energy crisis, there has been an exponential increase in interest for energy communities, and other self-consumption solutions in Greece over the past two years. At the same time, energy communities are breaking ground with cutting-edge, large-scale projects (including agrivoltaics, district heating and offshore wind), cementing their footing as equals in the energy market (Schwanitz et al. 2023). Clearly, there are significant opportunities for the decommodification and democratisation of the energy market, a hitherto oligopolist system of extreme profiteering. At the same time, many Greek energy communities are examples of real-existing degrowth.

Nonetheless, there's crucial ongoing work to make community energy groups more inclusive and degrowth oriented. A key element still missing from the degrowth transformation discourse around energy communities is the explicit articulation of a degrowth vision. While the practices of Greek energy communities strongly align with many degrowth principles, they are not often guided by an overarching, cohesive degrowth vision (Vrettos et al. 2024). Lack of intentionality potentially paves the way for significant contradictions and rebound effects. What if members of energy communities used the savings incurred from self-consumption projects to invest in buying new cars, or trans-Atlantic flights? Or, if a large private electricity supplier offered them a 'green guarantee' contract, would they bother joining an energy cooperative? A broader vision must encompass conscious elements of sufficiency to ensure absolute and deep demand reduction and, push for solidarity with the Global South, emphasising that sufficiency principles in the Global North are needed to eliminate extractivist, neo-colonial practices associated with renewables supply chains

(Vrettos et al. 2024). With over 100 MW of installed collective self-consumption projects, hundreds more in the Greek energy communities are making genuine strides in shifting the renewable energy transition beyond profit. Weaving this tremendous potential into a solid, explicitly articulated, degrowth vision could address some of the movement's inherent contradictions.

Real-existing degrowth on Greek islands

The term 'island' typically refers to land surrounded by water, but its definition can vary. Islands might emerge from tides or be surrounded by peatlands. Metaphorically, islands symbolise escapism, experimentation and remoteness. Many of the insular areas face several challenges, mostly related to limited resources, high vulnerability to climate crisis, and frequent hazards (Aguiar et al. 2018). In search for immediate economic growth, perceived needs to catch up with economic developments of more affluent areas can have important environmental, social and economic costs. However, as Tsagkari et al. (2021) argue, this is not the only path. To respond to contemporary challenges, islands can revitalise their economies without 'succumbing to growthism'. Islands, whether physical or symbolic, can offer glimpses into alternative narratives of simplicity, prosperity and community resilience, challenging conventional notions of development and progress.

In recent studies, attention has turned to systems operating on islands like Eigg in Scotland (Caramizaru and Uihlein 2020) and the management of common resources such as fish quotas in the Shetland Islands (Cunningham and Bostock 2005). By virtue of their geographical boundaries and limited local resources, islands often maintain a more direct and conscious relationship with their material and ecological limits, making their inhabitants inherently more aware of resource constraints and interdependencies (Burgos Martinez 2024). While many proponents of degrowth acknowledge the necessity of developing island regions, they reject uncritical modernisation based on conventional models. Essential infrastructure like water supplies, reliable electricity, shops, schools, healthcare, public transport and digital advancements are recognised as crucial for ensuring quality of life. Nurturing commons through local associations, cooperatives and networks to manage these services fosters local engagement and participatory approaches. The synergy between commoning and degrowth can pave the way for the emergence of new socio-political systems that prioritise equity and participation while resisting enclosure and preserving communal spaces (Jakob and Edenhofer 2014; Lockyer 2017).

Greek islands boast a unique blend of geographical, cultural and socio-economic particularities that make them intriguing subjects for degrowth studies. Geographically dispersed across the Aegean and Ionian Seas, each has its own distinct landscape, climate and natural resources. Their insular nature presents challenges such as limited land, water scarcity and vulnerability to environmental hazards like wildfires and sea-level rise. However, their very insularity fosters a strong sense of community and interconnectedness among islanders, often characterised by tight-knit social networks and collective resilience in the face of adversity. Culturally, Greek islands are rich tapestries woven with centuries of history, tradition and folklore. Each island has its own unique cultural heritage, shaped by influences from ancient civilisations, Byzantine and Ottoman rule, as well as more recent migrations and interactions with mainland Greece and other Mediterranean cultures.

Traditional practices such as agriculture, fishing and artisanal crafts are deeply ingrained in island life, contributing to a distinct way of living that *values* simplicity, self-sufficiency and conviviality (Theodossopoulos 2003). Examples abound of adoption of local currencies, support for small family farms, promotion of cooperatives and cultivation of local networks encompassing

consumers, farmers and markets – a model often referred to as 'relocalisation' (Tsagkari et al. 2021). Additionally, rekindling old customs, such as the Greek tradition of '*charáki*' involving communal sharing of cheese and milk among shepherds (Lekakis and Dragouni 2020) and solidarity networks (*Ενωση Φορέων ΚΑΛΟ*) (Kalaitzi 2024), and the revival of convivial economic activities and women's cooperatives in Lesvos (Karides 2016) and Karpathos (Iliadou 2021) or the local energy projects of Tilos (Tsagkari et al. 2021) and Serifos (Katsaprakakis et al. 2022).

The examples of Gavdos, Tilos and Ikaria

Kallis et al. (2022) discuss the Greek islands of Ikaria and Gavdos as examples of territories that have not followed the Western development path. They combine ideas of Southern thought (Cassano 2012), islandness, and real-existing degrowth to explore how the geographical, historical and cultural factors of these islands have shaped an ethos and praxis of degrowth. Their research explores how values of Southern thought, which prioritise slowness, moderation and conviviality, are interconnected with the condition of islandness. They discuss how the specific geography, historical contingency and processes of mythmaking have re-valued what might be seen just as 'undeveloped' places but rather create space for real-existing degrowth. Kallis et al. (2022) emphasise the role of local folk thought and interactions with outsiders, and highlight the resistance to conventional development and the emergence of alternative ways of living on these islands, despite ongoing processes of tourism and gentrification. Cultural practices and values contribute to a diversity of modes of existence, fostering alternative cultures characterised by degrowth, especially in the context of geographical margins. Their findings also discuss the challenges associated with the re-valorisation of territories that foster real-existing degrowth and promote alternative economic and social organising away from capitalist and productivist development.

Ikaria

Ikaria, a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea with a population of about 8,000 people, has gained special attention in recent years. The island belongs to the 'Blue Zones' – where people live longer than average. Previous studies have attributed the longevity of the Ikarians to their lifestyle, food and social arrangements (Chrysohoou et al. 2011; Legrand et al. 2021). For instance, many residents have daily interactions within their communities, and take long walks and naps, while their diet is Mediterranean, consisting primarily of homegrown vegetables, legumes, fish and herbal teas. Adherence to the Mediterranean diet combined with the consumption of locally produced products is one of the factors associated with the longevity of the population (Chrysohoou et al. 2011). In 2009, Panagiotakos et al. (2011, p. 1) conducted a study encompassing over 1,400 Ikarians aged 80 years and above to conclude that a combination of environmental factors, behavioural patterns and clinical characteristics might collectively contribute to an extended lifespan. 'Panigiria' are traditional festivals that celebrate the feast day of a saint or a religious event. They are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of Ikaria and represent multifaceted celebrations that amalgamate religious fervour, communal bonding and the preservation of traditional practices.

The research of López Barreiro (2024) tried to shed more light on social changes Ikaria faces today. Through a metabolic analysis, the author provides an exploration of sustainable lifestyles and the embrace of degrowth-relevant activities and principles. This research concludes that, although the island is highly dependent on the mainland, there is a strong connection with local production and that land defines the identity and lifestyle of the population. Imagining life in a

degrowth society based on values of autonomy, sufficiency and care, Rae Rhodes (2024, p. 27) found a strong presence of these values in Ikaria:

> The Ikarian approach is more laid-back, it's specific to a person's needs, and therefore results in less stress, more mindfulness, and perhaps more self-awareness and wellbeing. Ikarians seem to be in tune with their socio-ecological environments, more resilient and adaptable to its ups and downs.

Tilos

Another instance of insular real-existing degrowth is just about 52 nautical miles southwest of Ikaria – the quaint island of Tilos. Located in the Aegean Sea, this island of 65.52 km^2 is home to around 750 people (Municipality of Tilos 2024). The island's history dates to ancient times, with Neolithic evidence of human settlement. In past years the island has faced several challenges – the economic downturn, leading to declining population numbers and limited employment opportunities, particularly for the island's youth, and, like many small islands, environmental pressures, such as waste management and sustainable resource utilisation.

Tilos is known for its commitment to sustainability and conservation. The island's protected areas, including the Tilos Park (a Natura 2000 site), showcase its rich biodiversity and serve as sanctuaries for endangered species. Additionally, Tilos promotes local production through cooperatives such as the small cheese cooperative Irina. These efforts strengthen the island's economy while reducing reliance on imports. Tilos thrives on strong community bonds and a gift economy, where residents share resources and support one another (Tsagkari et al. 2022). Moreover, the island has shown solidarity with refugees, offering shelter and assistance despite its limited resources. Tilos exemplifies real-world degrowth principles through its inclusive community ethos (Tsagkari 2023).

In 2017, it became the first Mediterranean island to be powered entirely by renewable energy sources, testament to its dedication to preserving its natural heritage (Notton et al. 2017). This commitment to clean energy was part of the broader sustainability plan of the island that includes many practices that embrace degrowth ideas. Tsagkari et al. (2021) discuss the importance of promoting energy democracy, energy self-sufficiency, localised production and revitalisation of the local economy in the specific case of Tilos. They explore the complex relationship between degrowth, islands, and local energy to conclude that local energy projects can contribute to new social arrangements beyond economic growth and towards a degrowth path, of which Tilos is exemplary. It is the first island worldwide to earn the status of a Zero-Waste Island. Within a year of implementing door-to-door separate collection and organics management, Tilos achieved a groundbreaking 100 per cent diversion of residual waste from landfills, with recovery rates nearing 90 per cent, the transformation of its old landfill into a Centre for Circular Innovation, ingeniously processing waste into fertilizer, upcycled materials and waste-to-energy conversion (Mehta 2023).

Gavdos

Gavdos, a remote island in the Mediterranean at the southernmost border of Greece with a population of only 172 residents (Gavdos Island 2024), embodies the principles of degrowth through its small population, limited economic development and minimal infrastructure. With fewer than a hundred permanent residents, the island relies mainly on traditional activities like fishing, farming

and sustainable tourism, avoiding large-scale industrialisation. Although it relies heavily on tourism, Gavdos attracts those seeking alternative lifestyles. Andriotis refers to the 'antinomian' travel counterculture of Gavdos to describe how the island's appeal extends beyond traditional tourism. Varvarousis (2014), in his fieldwork in Gavdos, observes that the local community engages in liminal self-expression to forge social connections and to maintain its cohesion. These alternative social spaces arise from both individual and collective actions, primarily characterised by reciprocal giving and communal sharing (Kallis et al. 2022; Varvarousis 2014). For Varvarousis (2023), 'Gavdos's peculiarity emphasises the pluriverse of the Aegean archipelago, one that must be protected and amplified in every possible way'.

Emphasising local economies through sustainable agriculture, fisheries and renewable energy endeavours can lessen dependence on external resources and bolster economic resilience. Additionally, fostering community empowerment and collaboration, both within and beyond the islands, can facilitate alignment of common degrowth visions and strategies. Despite the aspiration that islands like Tilos, Ikaria and Gavdos offer, helping us to envision how degrowth might look in practice, they are not perfect. The islands are still highly dependent on the mainland and suffer from touristification, out-migration, lack of infrastructure and environmental degradation. For instance, Gavdos is resisting the prohibition of nudism on the island – a symbol of freedom (Ioannou 2023) – and Ikaria is standing against land grabbing for wind parks.

Conclusion

All the movements discussed in the chapter have potential to serve as core democratic, bottom-up and self-organised entities prefiguring degrowth cultures and ways of living. Through their daily acts of resistance, they establish connections with the tangible realities of existing degrowth ideas. Collectives advocating for degrowth must be mindful of framing because most of the population endured significant hardship during the financial crisis and they perceive growth as necessary for recovery. Most in Greece, as in other countries in the European South and around the Mediterranean Sea, have strong ties with their local community and families. Most Athenians have roots in villages where they spent memorable times during vacations close to their relatives. These connections with an (often) simpler and slower lifestyle can offer valuable images and experiences to promote degrowth principles and policies. Combined with widespread distrust towards the central government, there is a strong potential for community building away from big cities where people can live in symbiosis with nature. Even where people don't explicitly mention degrowth, it seems like they implicitly support a degrowth vision and would be ready to believe in and push for it.

Such connections offer a unique opportunity to engage individuals in conversations about degrowth principles and policies. By tapping into the sentimentality and cultural heritage associated with rural and island living, advocates can effectively communicate the benefits of sustainable practices and mindful consumption. Highlighting the resilience and resourcefulness of village communities that have long practised self-sufficiency and communal living can serve as inspiration for transitioning towards a more sustainable future.

Moreover, real-existing degrowth initiatives in Greece provide tangible and inspiring examples of how principles can be put into action. Energy communities, where residents come together to generate renewable energy and promote energy autonomy, showcase the power of collective action and decentralised governance. A-developed islands, which have embraced sustainable practices out of necessity, demonstrate the potential for small-scale, community-driven solutions to environmental challenges.

The environmental movement in Greece serves as a testament to the power of grassroots activism in advocating for systemic change. By linking environmental conservation with social justice and economic equity, activists have been able to mobilise diverse coalitions and challenge the status quo. Countering prevailing negative and defeatist attitudes, that stem from disillusionment with capitalism and austerity-era disappointments, a degrowth vision is a promising solution, fostering a belief in a brighter future.

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11

‘DEGROWTH’ AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE HEGEMONY

Nick Fitzpatrick

This chapter examines the linguistic domination of the English translation *degrowth* as a reductionist concept that has become prominent in ecological economics to advocate for the downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints, planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing well-being. Tracing its roots to the French *décroissance* movement of the early 2000s, this term evolved to find new expression in English-speaking discourse. Through an updated systematic mapping of degrowth literature, this analysis points to two pivotal linguistic features – the rich historical context and current publication landscape – to speculate on risks to the future direction of degrowth literature and, potentially, the movement. The chapter offers critical insights into how the prevalence of English-language academic discourse expanded the reach of the scientific concept and social movement but may have inadvertently led to a redefinition contradicting its revolutionary origins and potential.

The French history

Every revolutionary concept emerges from its unique historical tapestry, and degrowth is no different. Put briefly, in academic and activist circles, *degrowth* has evolved to refer today to the downscaling of production and consumption to reduce ecological footprints, planned democratically in a way that is equitable while securing well-being (Parrique, 2025, p. 1). While critiques of growth date back to at least the 1960s (Borowy and Schmelzer 2017), the concept of *décroissance* emerged distinctively in France during the early 2000s (Liegey and Nelson 2020). In a watershed moment in 2002 anti-advertising activists purposefully crafted the term *décroissance soutenable* (sustainable degrowth) to challenge the prevailing notion of *développement durable* (sustainable development) (Cheynet and Clémentin 2002). These activists realised that within capitalist economies development had become synonymous with economic expansion such that high-income countries were considered ‘developed’ and low-income ones ‘developing’. This revealed the paradoxical existence of ‘sustainable development’ as its promises of universal prosperity were underpinned by imperial modes of living that are neither biophysically feasible nor socially desirable (Brand and Wissen 2021, Chapter 27, this volume; Vogel and Hickel 2023). This is what makes degrowth different from other sustainability visions because it calls for reparations, redistribution and reduction. Thus, a distinct movement for social-ecological transformation was born.

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The seeds of degrowth were sown during revolutionary periods of the mid-20th century (Lievens 2015). This fertile period saw the convergence of social and ecological resistance to capitalist imperialism become widespread, including within anti-imperialist and environmentalist movements. The degrowth movement's strength emerged from its ability to weave together diverse critiques of capitalism, imperialism, extractivism, productivism, techno-optimism, economism, patriarchy and hegemony into a systematic critique of growth (Schmelzer et al. 2022, pp. 90–190). This rich synthesis is part of the reason why many now consider degrowth to be a multi-layered concept (D'Alisa et al. 2014). For scholars like Parrique (2019, pp. 171–234) degrowth has evolved to include at least three denotations: (1) degrowth as decline of environmental pressures, (2) degrowth as emancipation from destructive ideologies and (3) degrowth as destinations towards sustainable societies. To fully appreciate this evolution requires engaging with the breadth of degrowth literature.

As mentioned, the 21st century marked the birth of *décroissance soutenable*. In 2002, *L'Ecologiste* published a special issue Défaire le développement, refaire le monde! (Unmake development, Remake the world), which assembled a group of diverse voices criticising the ideology and practices of development (Appfel-Marglin et al. 2003). This intellectual spark ignited further dialogue through a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference on post-development, where academics and activists explored ways to reclaim our relationships with knowledge, money and trade. The concept gained further momentum when, at the same time, the activist magazine *S!lence* published the special issue (no. 200), Décroissance soutenable et conviviale (Convivial and sustainable degrowth), thus coining the term *décroissance* and expanding its meaning beyond environmental interpretations to include the decolonisation of our social imaginaries (Latouche 2002). This broader vision – transcending the mere reduction of production and consumption to directly challenging capitalism, colonialism and consumerism – filled a crucial void that had been left by anti-globalisation movements in the wake of 11 September 2001.

The English translation

Prior to its translation into English in 2008, *degrowth* had emerged as a word with similar meanings in many different languages deriving from the French word *décroissance*. In Latin languages the same construction was possible. Take for example, *decrescita* for Italian anti-globalisation activists (2004); *decreixement* for Catalan and *decrecimiento* for Spanish energy activists (2005); *descrecimiento* in México (2007); *décroissance* for French speakers in Belgium (2003), Canada (2007), and Switzerland (2008) but *postwachstum* in German (2005) – see details of their evolution and meaning in other chapters of Part II, this volume.

In fact, it was not until 2008 that '*décroissance'* was translated into English as '*degrowth*' –for the First International Conference on Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity in Paris, France (Demaria et al. 2013, p. 195). This translation followed a proposal by François Schneider to expand degrowth in academia in the hope that a more scientific foundation would increase the credibility of science-activism, although this strategy's effectiveness remains debated (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). The conference, gathering around 130 researchers primarily from economics, culminated in the seminal Degrowth Declaration of the Paris 2008 Conference (Research & Degrowth 2010). Citing the social and ecological destruction of economic growth, exacerbated by events like the Global Financial Crisis which emerged in mid-2007, the declaration called for a paradigm shift whereby growth-based economies would contract and converge their ecological footprints to globally sustainable levels. Academic recognition crystallised

in April 2009, when the *Ecological Economics* journal published the first article using the term '*degrowth*', defined narrowly as 'producing and consuming less' (Huppes and Ishikawa 2009, p. 1697).

The emergence of '*degrowth*' as an English translation sparked rich intellectual discourse and debate. For some degrowth has been described as a concept of scientific analysis (Parrique 2019, p. 208); for others, a political slogan (Latouche 2006, p. 16). Essentially, people characterise degrowth differently. For example, as a scientific project (Schneider et al. 2010), an emerging paradigm (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010), a political project (Kallis 2011), an interpretative frame (Demaria et al. 2013), or a narrative (Sekulova et al. 2013). Meanwhile, some deliberately misconceptualised and criticised degrowth despite little engagement with it (Parrique 2019, pp. 319–462). This conceptual diversity reflects the different contexts within which degrowth has been adopted – from academic disciplines to activist circles, from policy corridors to public discourse across various countries.

The movement has evolved through international *degrowth* conferences, which are predominantly held in English and are increasingly academic in nature. From its origins in Paris (2008), through to conferences in Barcelona (2010), Venice (2012), Leipzig (2014), Budapest (2016), Malmö (2018), Manchester (2021), and The Hague (2021), to Zagreb (2023), Pontevedra (2024) and Oslo (2025), each gathering shaping the discourse further. The European Parliament's 2018 Post-Growth and 2023 Beyond Growth conferences catalysed national conferences in Italy, Austria, Denmark, France and Ireland (all held during 2024) that were conducted in their respective national languages mixed with some sessions in English.

The movement's reach in terms of conferences has extended beyond Europe to Canada (2012), Mexico (2018) and New Zealand (2023). However, these developments did not come without consequences as some historic actors, usually French speakers, were critical and felt that speaking English as a second language would make it difficult for non-native speakers to participate fully in degrowth conferences. This meant valuable earlier debates remain untranslated as other significant works like those in *Revue Entropia* and *Journal la Décroissance* faded from prominence. Even many highly cited degrowth authors were against creating the primarily English-speaking *Degrowth Journal*, arguing that corporate publishers like Elsevier and others provide sufficient space and credibility for research on degrowth (Beverungen et al. 2012). So, while the language of international conferences remains contested, the increasingly academic format became a more unquestioned norm until the 10th International Degrowth Conference in Pontevedra, which took place simultaneously with the 15th Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics in 2024 (Bunea and Garnier 2024).

English hegemony

Within two decades, degrowth has blossomed into a vibrant scientific field and social movement that carries out research projects, direct actions, educational programs, public dialogues and arts festivals through hundreds of global organisations. Yet this expansion brought an unexpected tension – as English became the lingua franca, exemplified by its primacy in the International Degrowth Network, launched in 2023, questions of linguistic hegemony emerged. This tension in 'translation' is characteristic of similar ones noted in other literatures and fields of studies. Of course, this development is entangled with the primacy of degrowth publications in ecological economics and similar disciplines, which inevitably skews the literature in more economistic and mainstream ways.

Hamel (2007) reports that English scientific work was counterbalanced by work in French and German early in the 20th century although English was already dominant then in political

economy. By the end of the 20th century, with the imperialist influence of the United States (US), English had become a hegemonic language. By the start of the 21st century English dominated at least three-quarters of international journals, effectively creating a 'TINA' (there is no alternative) approach to science whereby to gain influence and impact academics must be publishing in English and favouring sources from Anglophone countries (Hamel 2007, pp. 60–2). Most relevant to the discussion of degrowth literature is the study's conclusion, which states that 'French is the most visible case of status loss', further underscoring the significant French and Spanish discourses that exist alongside or outside work (translated) into English (Hamel 2007, pp. 62–3).

The risks of distorting concepts when translating knowledge are well-acknowledged. For instance, Droz et al. (2022) have highlighted the various nuances associated with 'nature' in numerous East and South-East Asian linguistic cultures and its problematic use by international organisations as '#nature' in online media and within the environmental humanities literature. This has led scholars like Hammond and Cook (2023) to conceptualise translation as an act producing differences-in-relation instead of bridging pre-existing differences because the process of translation often fails to link place and language, bridge cultural differences, or promote self-identity – a finding that links to calls by institutions like the Rachel Carson Center in Munich to emphasise the need for environmental sciences to practice multilingualism (Finch-Race and Ritson 2021).

While the English dominance within degrowth literature mirrors patterns in other academic and activist spheres, notable phenomena have emerged. Formal, organised and explicit degrowth movements in countries from the English-speaking imperialist core such as the US, United Kingdom (UK), Australia, New Zealand and Canada were delayed until the 2020s. Prior to such activist developments, it was scholars in these countries who had led in their interest, works and interventions in the emerging degrowth field of studies. Still, there seems to be a tendency, especially for those who were raised, educated or reside in the English-speaking imperialist core to display marked hesitation towards the term '*degrowth*', preferring ostensibly gentler alternatives like post-growth, doughnut economics or well-being economy in the hope of not alienating powerful stakeholders and public audiences (Spash 2021). These dynamics underscore the importance of tracking the degrowth literature's evolution – to understand extra reasons for how, when and why English assumed its dominant position.

The publication landscape

A thorough understanding of any field demands rigorous investigation of its philosophical, cultural and social foundations. Building on a recent systematic mapping and thematic synthesis of the degrowth literature (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022), research conducted for this chapter complements the insights of several contemporary reviews (Cosme et al. 2017; Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Kallis et al. 2018; Parrique 2019; Vandeventer et al. 2019; Engler et al. 2024). Using the RepOrting standards for Systematic Evidence Synthesis (ROSES) methodology (Haddaway et al. 2018), I searched three database collections (Scopus, Directory of Open Access Journals, Open Access Theses and Dissertations) for 40 translations of the word '*décroissance*' from 2005 to April 2024 (Table 11.1).

While grey literature is often wrongly excluded from systematic reviews (Haddaway et al. 2020), for example by mainstream orthodox economists whose philosophy is at odds with any type of anti-capitalism (Savin and van den Bergh 2024), our study embraces books, book chapters, and bachelor, master's and doctorate theses to ensure comprehensive coverage of degrowth as an emerging social movement. An important caveat here is that during the first decade of *décroissance* its essence lived primarily in political, activist, and practitioner spheres. Much of this rich

Table 11.1 Known translations of '*degrowth*' (in English alphabetical order).

English reference to language	Self-nominated language	'Degrowth' translation
Arabic	عربي	عربانخفاض النمو
Basque	Euskara	desazkundea, gutxitu
Catalan	Català	decreixment
Chinese	中文 退增长	去增长
Croatian	Hrvatski	Odrast
Czech	Český	Nerůst
Danish	Dansk	Modvækst
Dutch	Nederlandse	Ontgroei
English	English	degrowth, de-growth
Estonian	Eesti	tasaareng
Finnish	Suomen	kasvun, kohtuutalous
French	Français	*décroissance*
Galician	Galego	decrecemento
German	Deutsch	entwachstum, postwachstum
Greek	Ελληνική	αποανάπτυξη
Hebrew	עִברִית	חוסר צמיחה
Hungarian	Magyar	nemnövekedés
Italian	Italiano	decrescita
Japanese	日本	脱成長, デグローズ
Korean	한국어	탈성장
Latvian	Latviešu	neaugsme, rimšana
Norwegian	Norsk	veksfri utvikling
Polish	Polski	Dewzrost
Portuguese	Português	decrescimento
Russian	Русский	Дерост
Serbian	Srpskom	Odrast
Slovak	Slovenský	bezrastová
Slovenian	Slovenski	Degresija
Spanish	Español	Decrecimiento
Swahili	Kiswahili	Kupungua
Swedish	Svenska	Nerväxt
Turkish	Türkçe	Küçülme
Ukrainian	українська	Антизростання

history remains unrecorded or lost, skewing our present analysis towards academic, written, discourse. Nevertheless, this investigation aimed to capture the full spectrum of degrowth publications, including critiques, moving beyond the narrower focus of 'policy proposals' in Fitzpatrick et al. (2022). Next, title, abstract and keywords were screened by a guiding question: Does this study focus on '*degrowth*' in the context of ecological sustainability and social equity? Texts without abstracts, for example books, chapters, and theses, were scanned separately. Likewise, non-English texts were translated with online document translators during the screening process.

This analysis revealed 1,715 unique texts, including 160 book chapters, 37 books and 235 student theses. While the earliest works emerged in French in 2005 (Latouche 2005a, 2005b), the field continues to reach new heights with 288 publications in 2023. The discourse has shifted dramatically since 2008 when Fournier (2008, p. 528) noted just three English-language articles on degrowth – Baykan (2007), Fotopoulos (2007) and Latouche (2007). By 2024, despite searching 38 languages, contributions appeared in only 13, with English accounting for 84 per cent of all texts. The remaining discourse was distributed across Spanish (5%), French (3%), Portuguese (3%) and a diverse 5 per cent including Serbo-Croatian, Czech, Finnish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian and Slovenian – which largely introduced rather than advanced degrowth thinking.

By the mid-2020s, the geographic concentration of degrowth scholarship reveals telling patterns: approximately 80 per cent of articles emanate from Europe, including non-Europeans residents, with the remaining primarily from economists based in the UK, North America and Oceania. The field's intellectual nucleus centres in Spain, the UK, Germany, the US, Sweden, the Netherlands and Australia. While degrowth research appears in nearly 200 outlets, seven journals emerge as primary platforms – *Ecological Economics*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Sustainability Switzerland*, *Sustainability Science*, *Futures*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* and the *Journal of Political Ecology*. Their prestigious status seemingly reflects a strategic choice to enhance the authors' and the field's academic credentials but might also reflect those journals' openness or even encouragement of degrowth.

The future of '*degrowth*'

In this brief analysis a concerning pattern emerges: the English-language appropriation of the '*degrowth*' concept reflects broader political-economic structures that risk undermining the movement's revolutionary origins and potential. While translating *décroissance* into English has amplified the critique of economic growth, especially given English's status as the global lingua franca, this linguistic shift carries profound implications that warrant critical examination.

The English interpretation of degrowth must be understood within its specific political-economic context. When *décroissance* entered the Anglophone world in the late 2000s, it encountered an academic landscape within fields such as ecological economics where radical critiques of social systems were often sanitised into technical jargon and policy proposals. This reflects a broader trend in English-language scholarship, especially in economics, to depoliticise inherently political concepts, such as 'social provisioning systems'. Consequently, the translation process has often stripped degrowth of its cultural and political content, reducing this multifaceted movement that emerged out of radical French thought (see Chapter 5, this volume) down to a set of policy proposals that are palatable to orthodox mainstream economists and institutions (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022).

This linguistic transformation mirrors the historical patterns of knowledge colonisation. As already mentioned, scholars from the US, UK, and other settler colonies often exhibit reluctance to adopt the term '*degrowth*', preferring less confrontational alternatives like post-growth, doughnut

economics or well-being economy. This hesitance reflects the entrenchment of growth-oriented, market-based ideologies within English-speaking academia. Especially in Anglophone countries, where English has historically spread through the violent structures of capitalism and imperialism, the widespread adoption of degrowth values as new common senses risks becoming distorted unless intentional efforts are made to retain the movement's cultural and political dimensions.

The dominance of the English translation extends beyond linguistics into ethical frameworks. Ahmed et al. (2023), for example, illustrate how scientific publishing bias towards English-language hegemony shapes not only knowledge dissemination but also perceptions of being and reality (ontology) and approaches to knowledge (epistemology). A common error, particularly among economists, involves converting ontological questions into epistemological ones (Spash 2024). In the case of degrowth, the risk involves reducing complex social and ecological structures down to quantifiable metrics and predictive models which frame economies as closed systems consisting of self-interested individuals. Such reductionist approaches seem evident in descriptions of projects such as the €9.9 million European Research Council Synergy grant project REAL: A Post-Growth Deal (REAL 2024) and the €3.8 million EU Horizon project MAPS: Models, Assessment, and Policies for Sustainability (European Commission 2024), which exemplify how degrowth can be co-opted into quantifiable frameworks that sideline its radical critique of modernity.

Although translating degrowth into English has contributed to its rising popularity, as it is the most widely spoken second language globally, we must also be willing to question and unlearn the worldviews and ideologies that traditionally come with using such languages (Thomson 2011). For example, if English-speaking activists and academics were historically disadvantaged by the increase of degrowth knowledge and experimentation in non-English European contexts, the rise in linguistic domination of the English translation has implications that favour those who write and read fluently in English, whether they live in countries where the official language is English or not.

The academic landscape of degrowth research reveals concentration patterns mirroring the very systems the movement critiques. Citation analysis shows that a small group of English-speaking scholars, predominantly from prestigious Western institutions, dominate the field. Furthermore, bibliometric analysis illustrates the five most-cited authors – Giorgos Kallis (19%), Joan-Martínez-Alier (10%), Federico Demaria (7%), Jason Hickel (6%) and Serge Latouche (3%) – collectively account for a significant portion of citations, with the most-cited female author being Filka Sekulova (2.7%). The prominence of a select few, who receive a disproportionate share of citations, exemplifies the 'academic stardom' trend, contradicting degrowth's commitment to diversity and democratic knowledge production, especially in terms of decolonisation of the imaginary, ecofeminism and horizontalism. The term *horizontalism*, which originates from the Spanish term *horizontalidad*, was coined during the popular rebellion against the Argentinian government in 2001 as communities fought for self-management, autonomy, and direct democracy (Sitrin, Chapter 4, this volume). Engler et al. (2024) further highlight limited collaboration in degrowth research, except among those associated with the Barcelona school of ecological economics and political ecology (Villamayor-Tomas and Muradian 2023). To this extent, degrowth scholarship risks replicating the errors of ecological economics where a small yet powerful collective directs the field's trajectory (Spash 2024).

This 'stardom' system flourishes under the structure of capitalist academia, where knowledge is commodified and corporatised, and scholarly impact is often reduced to quantifiable metrics like citation counts and h-indices. The parallel with gross domestic product's (GDP's) reductionist measure of societal progress is striking – just as GDP fails to capture the full spectrum of ecological and social reality, citation metrics similarly fail to capture the true impact, quality and value

of research on degrowth. This economisation of scholarship manifests not only in how research is disseminated, with deliberate strategies that prioritise high-impact English-language journals, but also in the cultivation of a limited number of scholars as the movement's faces. Here, degrowth scholars are increasingly treated as intellectual property, with published works subject to royalties and access restrictions that inhibit open discourse and reinforce barriers to knowledge-sharing. As a result, some degrowth thinkers are elevated as 'stars' while others are effectively marginalised, creating a hierarchy that stands in stark contrast to the movement's desire to act horizontally.

The media further amplifies this commodification by sensationalising certain voices over others, promoting controversy and spectacle over nuanced analysis, which leads to the dominance of simplified, quasi-scientific renderings over historical and sociological insights into the movement. This preference for ecological economics perspectives of degrowth, often stripped of the radical cultural and political content, reflects a broader trend to prioritise technical models over holistic, interdisciplinary practices. This paradox – whereby English serves as both enabler and constraint of dialogue – reflects broader tensions in academia surrounding knowledge production that warrant deeper consideration from the degrowth movement in the future.

To meaningfully embody its ideals, the movement must consider how capitalist structures embedded within academia commodify and reshape its scholarship, thereby risking the dilution of its transformative potential. For example, Hamel (2007, p. 68) outlines some strategies to promote a plurilingual turn by critical researchers, including requiring actively multilinguist scientists (at least in terms of reading); a preference to reading, quoting and referring to titles in their original language, as well as visiting scholars making efforts to become more familiar and skilled in their host's language(s). In summary, the degrowth movement must recognise that linguistic diversity is not merely a communication issue but a fundamental aspect of cognitive and cultural diversity that is essential to imagining the world beyond economic doublespeak and a unitary language of communication. Indeed, this insight was a driving force behind the curation of Part II of this volume.

While English and other European colonial languages – including French, where *décroissance* started – may bridge certain cultural barriers, they simultaneously encode worldviews and ideologies that degrowth explicitly opposes – capitalism, economism, extractivism, imperialism, utilitarianism, nationalism, patriarchy, productivism and techno-optimism (Schmelzer et al. 2022, pp. 90–190). The very structure of English, as a noun-based language that categorises and objectifies, contrasts with more relational, verb-based indigenous languages that better align with degrowth's holistic vision (Thomson 2011), as in the earlier French activist and practitioner works (Lazányi et al., Chapter 23, this volume). Addressing these challenges requires conscious intervention at multiple levels, including developing alternative metrics for evaluating research impact, supporting multilingual publishing platforms, and creating mechanisms to amplify voices from non-English speaking contexts. This involves not just preserving different language traditions but actively cultivating spaces where multiple linguistic-cum-conceptual frameworks can coexist and cross-fertilise into a pluriversal approach to politics (Kothari et al. 2018; Escobar 2020). Two such spaces where these insights seek to inspire improvements are in the International Degrowth Network and international degrowth conferences. The environmental humanities' emphasis on linguistic and cultural diversity offers valuable lessons going forward, even in the face of its own structural limitations.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn on historical background, an analysis of present publications, and speculated on future directions of degrowth research by updating a systematic mapping of the

relevant literature. Over the past two decades, degrowth has emerged and evolved into a scientific concept and social movement that opposes ecomodernist concepts like sustainable development and green growth. However, current scholarship suggests that the degrowth movement risks repeating the mistakes of associated fields, like ecological economics, by compromising its foundational principles to expand its reach. In contrast, the transformative potential of degrowth is activated when people act in alignment with their social and ecological values. To avoid imperialist outcomes, I have proposed strategies to preserve the movement's cultural and political integrity. Ultimately, native English-speaking degrowth proponents like me must embody the change they wish to see in the world by engaging with other languages and their associated literatures, all the while maintaining awareness of our positionality within a pluriversal political landscape.

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12

LATIN AMERICAN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES MEET DEGROWTH

David Barkin

Indigenous peoples around the world are drawing on their rich heritages to continue resisting their incorporation into the 'modern world system'.[1] Today, more than five centuries after the invasion of the 'Americas' by the colonial forces from Europe, descendants of the original communities are reasserting their claims to recognition and respect for this legacy and for a proper place in the societies in which they live. A significant part of these claims comes from the realisation that their traditions and 'cosmovisions' (worldviews)[2] contribute to the success of their prolonged struggles for survival. I use the Spanish term throughout to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding, given the considerable difference from the way in which the term is generally used in English. Cosmovisions refers to a multidimensional and historically grounded but dynamic corpus of beliefs that is continually revised on the basis of experience. In the recent period (differing among regions) their success in asserting their claims is rooted in the strength of their communal organisations and lifestyles that constitute important models for confronting the challenges provoked by the world system and responding to the crises facing the societies in their countries. In this chapter, I explore how the interaction of beliefs, traditions and organisations are forging different perspectives and creating innovative solutions for overcoming the challenges posed by the modern crises that the modern world system seems incapable of managing.

In sharp contrast to today's globalised societies, peasants and indigenous communities are creating new visions for the future, firmly anchored to their territories and integrated into alliances with like-minded groups in their regions or even on a planetary scale. These new social models address the profound contradictions that they faced during centuries of colonisation imposed by the expansion of military and economic forces that subjected them to myriad forms of exclusion, attempts at assimilation and campaigns of extermination. As a result, peoples around the world are deliberately searching for different approaches to organise themselves and guide their decisions on how to assure their basic needs while caring for their territories and assuring that nobody gets left behind.

Today's discussions of degrowth diverge greatly from these conceptions of social organisation. Framed in the context of the profound triad of economic, social and environmental crises that many consider to threaten the very pillars of human existence, degrowth discourses pose the need to reorganise society in order to reduce material consumption and alter the very social relations that shape today's globalised societies. Degrowth emerged from a concern about the dominant impact

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of affluent societies (even when substantial portions of their people are mired in poverty) on the planet's ability to sustain them. While there are some points of congruence with the organisation of the societies we are describing, fundamentally related to the material impacts of globalised societies, a divergence worthy of exploration is the lack of inclusion of cultural and spiritual dimensions in reordering society and relationships.[3] Even when there is explicit recognition of the importance of 'relocalisation', community-based autonomy, holistic care economies and the commons, there is insufficient attention to reshaping society in the hands of the people, promoting models of radical democracy in every dimension of collective life. The degrowth movement could learn much more from indigenous experiences, perspectives and practices in these transformative directions.

These 'new' indigenous visions of society are profoundly rooted in ancient traditions, a variety of histories or mythologies of the ways in which the world was created, and a recounting of their own origins. This wealth of creation stories underpins the extraordinary diversity of cultures; it is part of the explanation of the persistence of so many groups that continue to thrive in the multiplicity of ecologies in which they live. Here I explore some of the elements that support this remarkable ability to assure the integrity of their communities while also caring for the territories which they call home. As will become evident, these peoples are not simply organised into communities dedicated to their own survival but rather have structured themselves in such a way as to ensure the continuity of their traditions, to provide for the basic needs of all of their members, to care for their environs, and to defend themselves against the continuing onslaught of the 'outside' world – be it the nation-states in which they live or the global market economy that covets their resources and/or seeks to incorporate their members as new workers and consumers. The belief systems that organise the panoply of institutions, activities and production involved in assuring their survival can be thought of as 'cosmovisions' – philosophical systems that embrace the totality of their relationships to life on the planet. As we shall see, however, most of these communities do not propose to pursue their goals alone; rather they are generally involved in complex processes of collaboration and exchange with other like-minded groups in their immediate regions or in alliances that are developing regionally or internationally.

Building local communities

Many communities in Latin America are directly confronting important pressures from outside to assimilate, to adopt internationalised systems of production or to incorporate themselves into global patterns for their organisation and accept the institutional arrangements that have historically integrated so many into the ranks of the poorest echelons of local and global societies. In response, they are adopting processes of change to promote their own paradigms, 'communitarian paradigms of a culture of life', a culture that is known as the 'good life', sustained on the basis of a practice of harmony, respect and balance among themselves and with their surroundings.[4] This involves an understanding that everything is interrelated and interdependent, including and especially, many non-human beings and features of the planet on which we are so dependent. This is the point of departure for an understanding of a Latin American indigenous perspective on the question of organising life in today's world.

Thus, for the communities to which we are referring, the question is not one of assuring an adequate basket of goods for people but rather a problem of a collective commitment to the welfare of all the members of the community while also assuming responsibility for the care of their environs. This obligation is not simply one of attending to the material needs, for in many societies their underlying beliefs also encompass an obligation to care for all elements in the natural world – be they other living creatures (flora and fauna) or physical and geological features. These

indigenous approaches offer an inspiring alternative to the global market, economic growth, corporatism, capitalism and consumerism, which are to varying degrees the root causes of the serious social, economic and political crises that the degrowth paradigm is also trying to address. A common element among these cultures is their attachment to the territory, to the geographical space they occupy, a space that has a deep meaning, transcending the concept of property or belonging transformed into (private) property.

The character of solidarity within the communities is of paramount significance – in contrast to the heightened individualism of the 'globalised' societies in which they exist. This local solidarity facilitates the ability of individuals to pursue their own interests while contributing to the consolidation of the communities of which they are a part; solidarity, in this sense, involves obligations of reciprocity among members of the community. Unlike globalised societies, many of these communities enjoy a long history and a communal dynamic, despite the social forces that were pressuring them towards individualism and assimilation; in some cases, efforts to recover this heritage derive from the blows they suffered in trying to maintain their autonomy or rescue it after unhappy experiences of following the lure of developmentalism of past eras (Wolf 1982). They are forging collective organisations and dynamics for decision-making by consensus involving the participation of all their members, including women and youth; the significant importance of women's presence is reflected in the flourishing ecofeminist literature to which I later refer. This participatory or direct democracy enabled the integration of new voices in the formulation of strategies and programs. Of particular note in this regard is the relatively long history of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico (Villoro 2007, 2015; Esteva 2021).

Another characteristic worthy of further elaboration is the radical ontological difference of what in the Western world is known (and misunderstood) as 'nature'. In this relationship where everything is related to everything, many non-Western peoples do not make a distinction between the 'I' and the phenomenal world. They do not separate human beings and other species since, among many indigenous and afrodescendent peoples, they not only consider themselves part of nature but that *they are nature*. This profound difference stems from a great diversity of stories rooted in long traditions to explain the origins of the world and societies (as in Kopenawa and Albert 2013; Nenquimo and Anderson 2024). This reverence for the planet goes beyond recognising the omnipresence of the dialectical relationship between human and non-human natures of the *oikeios* or the web of life, where there is 'the creative, generating, and multidimensional relationship of species and the environment' (Moore 2020, p. 18), to its importance for determining our lives and the organisation of social life and its institutions.

The unique place of indigenous communities

A prominent Mexican indigenous leader recently published a book in Spanish, the title of which would read *We are, therefore . . . we think* – turning the well-known Cartesian aphorism *cogito, ergo sum* on its head (Martínez Luna 2023). This is perhaps the most apt way to introduce a discussion of the significance of indigenous cosmovisions in broaching the theme of sufficiency, challenging some Eurocentric formulations of degrowth and enriching the debates present in this volume, incorporating a need for the decolonisation of the dominant imaginaries. We are learning more about the implications of the myriad philosophical heritages of communities around the world, as they exert their rights for self-determination and autonomy. In Latin America, some of the best known are *Sumak Kawsay* among the Andean peoples, *comunalidad* in the Oaxaca highlands of Mexico, coined by Martínez Luna (2023), and *Lekil Kuklejal*, an expression of the Tseltsales in the Mayan region of southern Mexico (Mora 2017). In other parts of the world,

expressions such as *Ubuntu* ('I am because we are') – mentioned by Roland Ngam in Chapter 13, this volume – *Swaraj*, invoked by Mahatma Gandhi in his call for self-determination from the British, and *Kaupapa maori*, the guiding belief of the Maori people in New Zealand (Marsden 1993).

Myriad communities around the world actively involved in shaping their own 'brave new worlds' are deliberately strengthening cultures that privilege the 'collective' over the individual. In this way, they are creating models of society involved in distancing themselves from the dynamics of the nation-states in which they are located that have discriminated against them, often violently, displacing them from their original settlements, trying to erase their cultures through assimilation and marginalisation. Their perseverance and growth are testimony to the strength of their cultural heritage and their flexibility in adapting their traditions in the face of changing circumstances (Wolf 1982).

There are several overriding factors that explain their emergence as an important force to be reckoned with on the international scene. One of the first developments was the ratification of Convention 169 – the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) – by the International Labour Organization, and 24 countries, principally in Latin America (ILO 1989). It noted that the social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices of these peoples shall be recognised and protected. It bestowed the right to prior, free and informed consent with regard to legislative or administrative measures regarding their territories and the natural endowments therein.

Following on this development, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2007) adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and welcomed 'the fact that indigenous peoples are organising themselves for political, economic, social and cultural enhancement and in order to bring to an end to all forms of discrimination and oppression wherever they occur'. The UNDRIP delineates and defines the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, including their ownership rights to cultural and ceremonial expression, identity, language, employment, health, education and other issues. Their ownership also extends to the protection of their intellectual and cultural property. The declaration 'emphasises the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations'; and it 'prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples' and 'promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them and their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development' (UNGA 2007).

Subsequently, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2018) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. This UNGA (2018) process emphasised a characteristic that is particularly important in the present discussion, by recognising 'the special relationship and interaction between peasants and other people working in rural areas and the land, water and nature to which they are attached and on which they depend for their livelihood' and, furthermore, their:

> past, present and future contributions . . . to development and to conserving and improving biodiversity, which constitute the basis of food and agricultural production throughout the world, and their contribution in ensuring the right to adequate food and food security, which are fundamental to attaining the internationally agreed development goals.

These diplomatic recognitions reflect a belated acknowledgement of the unique character and contributions these peoples are making to the global struggles in the face of the social, economic and environmental crises facing humanity and other living beings on the planet. In this short text, I explore some of the particular features of many of these societies that enable them to be models

for the alternative organisation of social and political life, of production and of environmental management that prompted the international community to adopt this body of jurisprudence. The latter still only represents a series of pronouncements of good intentions in the face of resistance by powerful political and economic forces that continue controlling their territories and populations as they have done for millennia.

Cosmovisions: worlds in conflict

An important point of departure for this presentation is a discussion of the concept of cosmovision. Belief 'systems' everywhere are fundamental in defining relationships among community members and with their surroundings. These belief systems are the product of generations of social practices and cultural heritages that reflect the most profound convictions of how the 'world' functions and its origins. Today, however, this very formulation is the object of fierce philosophical controversies that pose the question of how the planet functions and, therefore, the possibilities of confronting the profound environmental imbalances that humanity has provoked during past centuries.

On the one hand, there is the 'dominant' paradigm in the Global North of a world organised around a productive system in which it is said that individual initiative and unbridled competition among social actors can create the greatest well-being for society as a whole. This paradigm was gradually imposed on European societies as the political and military might of the local 'lords' overcame the fierce and sustained resistance of peasants and urban workers who had won an important measure of autonomy with agreements like the Magna Carta centuries before (1215) (Linebaugh 2008). The political counterpart of this system is embodied in a 'social contract' in which individual members cede their autonomy to a governing body, or individual chosen by various methods of representation, depending on the histories and struggles of peoples and elites in the political units of the global system. This doctrine evolved from its original formulation by Thomas Hobbes (1651) to a better-known formulation by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762). As the social and political system expanded, the world suffered the birth of capitalism with its consequent attacks against peasant and indigenous societies and the beginning of the environmental degradation that presently threatens the very survivability of humanity.

This paradigm became the foundation on which the European powers began their trans-Atlantic voyages of exploration and conquest, later spreading across different maritime and terrestrial routes to encompass virtually the whole planet. The result of this colonial expansion was not only the wholesale subjugation of peoples across the globe and the beginning of a centuries-long process of imperial appropriation of their territories and nature's bounty. It marked the beginning of the imposition of a new epistemology, deeply rooted in the philosophical tenets of individualist achievements and competition that set the stage for an unprecedented concentration of wealth and the generation of hitherto unfathomed depths of poverty for much of the world's population. It precipitated the advent of productive systems that generated this wealth and wrought the environmental crises that are now the concern of peoples proposing the need for a new culture of degrowth. From its very beginnings, it also provoked philosophical and political challenges (including from Karl Marx, William Jevons, Rachel Carson, Kenneth Boulding and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen) that highlighted planetary limits, as well as human and ecological degradation, while also generating myriad forms of social resistance that were the forerunners of today's degrowth movements.

On the other hand, many indigenous peoples are discovering new strategies to resist their incorporation or even to reverse the historical processes of assimilation to which they were victims

during what many consider to be the dark heritage of colonial subjugation. This political and philosophical renaissance has its roots in the many alternative cosmovisions deeply embedded in their cultures. Although varying across the world, most of these belief systems share common roots that are only now being explored, as common traits dating back to the Paleolithic era are being examined critically by scholars engaged in trying to trace their origins to some of the earliest signs of communal life by humans on the planet. Perhaps one of the most significant for present purposes is the place of society – in contrast to the prevailing view that considers the natural world to be apart from people, a bounty to be explored and exploited for the benefit of humanity, many 'traditional' peoples consider themselves to be a part of nature, enjoying a mutual interdependence that calls for significant energies to be devoted to the care of the living (non-human) beings and physical features of their territories that play an important role in ensuring their well-being.

Today's cosmovisions reflect an amalgam of the teachings surviving from past epochs and the adaptations incorporated as a result of more recent practice. A Spanish language translation of Andean practices has emerged as a catchword that is now widely understood as encompassing the current vitality of this indigenous approach to organising society and life itself – *buen vivir* (good life). Although codified in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, it is now clear that this recognition is not sufficient to assure the implementation within the institutions of the 'modern' nation-state of a complex philosophical understanding of the multidimensional lived experience that emerged from within the practice of individual communities. These cosmovisions evolved from the practice of a diversity of communities in their struggles to assure their well-being and the integrity of their territories. In the process they have developed collective processes of governance and communal mechanisms to provide an adequate quality of life for their members while also attending to the needs of the territories in which they are settled.

An important feature of life in these communities, dating back to pre-conquest times, is their continuing dynamic of relationships with others, be they of the same ethnic origins or of others. There is ample evidence that complex networks of political, social and trade relations emerged many thousands of years ago, promoting intense cultural exchanges as well as technological and scientific advances rooted in the varying resource endowments of the diverse communities (Cossens 2019). The astronomic advances of the Mayan peoples are known to have contributed to the development of ceremonial calendars in many other regions that were involved with them in material and cultural exchanges.

A very significant development that illustrates this intense interaction of a local and long-distance collaboration is the invention of maize ('corn' in North America). Developed by generations of peoples involved in seed selection from its origins in Teosinte in Mesoamerica, some 8,000 years ago (or more), the seeds travelled to South America and back again, spawning numerous varieties that are the forerunners of this very important grain for human and animal consumption today around the world. Perhaps as important as the development of the seed varieties was the emergence of the cultivation system known as the *milpa* in Mexico, a complex agroecological system involving the intercropping of maize with varieties of beans and squash in a symbiotic whole that contributes to increased yields and biotic protection against predators that would endanger the crops if sown separately (Pennisi 2024). Another technological development that has not proved to be as widely shared is the process of 'nixtamalisation' in which maize is cooked with lime, a process that releases the amino acids 'locked' in the grains to make a perfect combination with the amino acids in the beans to produce a complete vegetable protein. This contributed to the very satisfactory nutritional status of Mesoamerican peoples, when compared to communities in other parts of the world at that time.

Even today, these interactions among indigenous and rural communities around the world are flourishing. Formal international alliances have emerged during the past quarter century to create

mechanisms of mutual support and prosecute their demands for recognition and protection through international treaties and conventions, like those aforementioned. The largest social organisation in the world today in terms of membership (more than 200 million members) is La Via Campesina (LVC), a group established in 1993 to defend the interests of small-scale farmers, promoting the concept of food self-sufficiency and, more recently, the many agroecological farming systems that also focus on appropriate cultivation systems that are conducive to environmental restoration and balance (LVC 2024). In addition to this agenda, the organisation continues to play an important role in the international diplomatic arena, attempting to counteract the efforts of agroindustrial interests to orient global policies towards promoting large-scale monocropping systems as a way of addressing the challenge of assuring adequate food production, especially for the neediest segments of the world's population. LVC continually points out that it is the small-scale farming groups around the world, and especially its members, who supply on the order of 70 to 80 per cent of the world's food for human consumption (AFSA et al. 2022).

Another important international alliance of indigenous and rural peoples is 'Territories of Life', a membership-based association bringing together Indigenous Peoples and local communities committed to the conservation of their territories. The consortium works to promote the recognition of their diverse rights in accordance with international agreements and national frameworks, while assisting them in fulfilling their responsibilities to their members and the larger indigenous communities of which they are a part. Territories of Life was born out of a concern for supporting the right of their members who are managing and conserving their common heritages, a strategy that is essential for contributing to a healthy planet (ICCA 2024).

This group strives to go beyond the productive achievements of the LVC, integrating communities/peoples guided by the principles of promoting local political sovereignty (autonomy), self-sufficiency, and territorial defence, as well as the consolidation of their cultures. Located in 200 countries, the member organisations have claims on traditional areas equal to more than one-quarter of the planet Earth's surface area (Garnett et al. 2018). Like LVC, these groups are more concerned with addressing the basic needs of their members and reinforcing their ability to fortify and enrich their cultural heritages, developing networks of mutual support (Borrini-Feyerabend and Jaeger 2024; Stevens et al. 2024).

An aligned, but very much decentralised network is the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), which describes itself in GTA (undated) as follows.

> The Global Tapestry of Alternatives is an initiative seeking to create solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst all these alternatives on local, regional and global levels. It locates itself in or helps initiate interactions among alternatives. It operates through varied and light structures, defined in each space, that are horizontal, democratic, inclusive and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communicating. The initiative has no central structure or control mechanisms. It spreads step by step as an ever-expanding, complex set of tapestries. Weavers are woven together by already existing communal or collective webs, building on already existing and new alternatives to dominant regimes. It promotes or joins regional, national and global encounters, when the conditions allow for them, as well as close and synergistic linkages with existing organizations, like the World Social Forum.

These organisations are creating an important bulwark against the dominating system of individualism in which people participate in organisations only to the extent that they offer palpable benefits. Building alliances among communities that are committed to the collective well-being of their members, in which individuals can realise their potential by applying their skills for the benefit

of the whole, offers a different framework for understanding the dynamics of social and political organisations. These alternative dynamics emerge from the underlying forces that are continually being shaped by the interaction of cultural heritage and current pressures and opportunities. It is this complex intertwining of inherited philosophical systems and the continual search for solutions to the ever-present need to guarantee the welfare of the members, the integrity of the community and the viability of their territories.

Cosmovision, in this sense, is more than a received doctrine, carved on tablets given by a superior being, or from the preaching of a group of respected individuals whose wisdom offers an ageless body of teaching for all posterity. The cosmovisions of the peoples whose histories can be traced back millennia are not a static corpus of doctrine but rather an evolving set of practices and a cumulative body of knowledge that has facilitated their perseverance through the centuries. Today, they offer valuable lessons about how their members interact among themselves to strengthen community as well as significant knowledge about the way to coexist with the planet, avoiding the many imbalances that threaten the planet and provoke social and political unrest in today's globalised culture.

In the following sections, I address some specific features common to many of these communities that contribute to their ability to become important models for confronting the challenges posed by the global imbalances facing humanity. Most significantly, in the context of the present volume, their approaches offer an interesting panoply of activities that can be usefully compared and contrasted with the approaches and concerns offered by authors of other chapters in this handbook.

Forging the community subject

Strengthening communities involves the emergence of a 'collective subject', a group of people recognised by the members with the moral authority to lead the society in its activities and its struggles to maintain its identity. This new actor has the responsibility to generate a social dynamic to create the possibilities for the social appropriation of nature (to conserve and protect their territories). In doing so the group must transcend the notion of individuality, creating a political dynamic generated by building consensus (Barkin and Sánchez 2020).

Community dynamics offer important contributions to advance in the process of building new socio-metabolic configurations to assure environmental balance, improve the quality of collective life, and reinforce the capacity for self-governance and the advance of demands for autonomy (Barkin and Fuente 2021). Socio-metabolic configurations define the way in which societies interact with the planet (Fischer-Kowalski and Huttler 1999; Burkett and Foster 2006). The communities we describe in this chapter are particularly concerned about their impacts on their territories and, therefore, go to great lengths to attempt to reduce their demands on their ecosystems – by trying to develop a balance between what they appropriate from nature and their disposition of residuals from production and consumption activities. Among such socio-metabolic configurations, we have identified three of utmost importance.

First, in the variety of cosmologies of the different peoples, there is implicit the commonality of their various social organisations in contrast to the social contract of the individual that dominates the main cultures of the North Atlantic world. A clear explanation of this is the contrast between the representative form of governance and the participatory process of consensual decision-making common in the communities.

Second, the possibility for the communities of workers, peasants, indigenous and afrodescendents to generate significant surpluses through the participation of all their members in the different

tasks identified by the assemblies and their leaders, and the commitment to use them for projects based on collective decision-making. These surpluses are frequently of a material (non-monetary) nature, involving improvements in infrastructure or contributions to communal celebrations that directly impact in the quality of collective life or the continuity of cultural traditions. One particularly notable institutionalised method is the assumption in most groups that everyone is expected to contribute their labour (without remuneration) to community projects and maintenance, called *tequio*, *faena* or *minga* in different Latin American cultures. Of course, in most communities, leadership roles are often honorific.

Third, the practical and analytical visibility of the perspective of women in the communities, whose struggles open new windows on their collective practices, as part of the community subject, and their contributions to sustaining life while maintaining the continuity of the territories. On the basis of their own narratives, they have become protagonists in the defence of lands and territories, active participants in the exercise of autonomy, the consolidation of their productive base, the management of the territory and the consolidation of alliances with other communities.

The (neo) Zapatista movement was born in the jungles and highlands of southern Mexico during the last quarter of the 20th century; it is an example of this struggle. From its very beginning, their leaders focused on the importance of overcoming patriarchy as part of a struggle for autonomy and self-sufficiency. They identified the centrality of constructing an alternative as integral to their efforts to reverse the destructive impacts of colonial society on nature as well as their own well-being. Importantly, they were cognisant of shaping a new organisation in which matriarchy did not involve a new domination of women over men but rather a different conception of life itself, based on the intricate relationships of all dimensions of social life with the non-human beings in their surroundings as well as with their territories. As one close observer of the movement put it: 'This is why, for all cultures, it can be said that "in the beginning, there was the mother", in the last instance, Mother Earth' (von Werlhof 2021, p. 39).

The 'communitarian subject' has become an active player in implementing community efforts to gain recognition as legitimate participants in the political processes in many countries, principally in the Global South. After years of exclusion, discrimination and outright persecution, they are successfully prosecuting their demands for recognition of their rights (as previously spelt out) as collective members on the national scene, although not without some reluctance on the part of governmental bodies in some countries.

Some material correlates of indigenous perspectives

Communal organisation, care of territory, growing assertion of autonomy and strategies for the balanced development of society as part of nature are some of the results of the cosmovisions that indigenous communities have cherished and enriched over the centuries. These characteristics, however, also are producing lifestyles that contrast strongly with dominant forms of social interaction and behaviour in the societies that evolved in the Global North and are aggressively disseminated across the globe.

As already suggested, a sensitive approach to understand these differences refers to the concept of sufficiency. In many of the communities we are describing the challenge they pose for themselves is not how to increase consumption but rather how to assure the welfare of all of their members while also assuming responsibility for the care of their territory. This obligation is not simply one of attending to their material needs for, in many societies, the underlying beliefs also encompass an obligation to tend to all elements in the natural world – be they other living creatures (flora and fauna) or physical and geological features. This extended concern is not simply a

rhetorical acknowledgement of the significance of the 'outside world' but rather its intricate and intimate integration into the very essence of the collective beings, the societies, that are forging new worlds.[5]

A productive approach to focusing on the concept of sufficiency is the decision-making process that assures the ability of many communities to provide for their basic needs and improve their quality of life while also reinforcing the significance of their cultural heritage. A significant dynamic in community life is the assembly, during which participants play a decisive role in formulating policies and allocating resources based on consensus rather than majority voting; often a time-consuming part of governance; it has proven essential in developing strategies for confronting basic challenges to assure social inclusion and planning.

This is particularly evident in their attention to the education of the young, in relations with governmental organisations, and in negotiations with groups attempting to obtain access to their natural endowments or to their people, as consumers or workers. Many communities are assuming responsibility for the first years of schooling, concerned about the implications of using materials developed for a national (or international) curriculum, and the loss of fluency in local languages. It is significant, however, that these same groups frequently encourage their young to prepare themselves for careers in advanced specialities that could be of importance for meeting the various challenges facing the communities. With the growing recognition of the important contributions that these groups can make to national integration, there are new initiatives by some national governments to support systems of indigenous education and promote biocultural organisations specifically designed to take advantage of this dynamic to reduce inherited spatial and political barriers.

Perhaps the greatest source of conflict between indigenous communities and the nation-states in which they are located is related to the exploitation of their natural bounty. In general, many communities are systematically opposed to overtures by outside interests to install mining operations or renewable energy projects (eolic or solar) for cultural as well as environmental reasons; the disruption of the local patterns of social organisation and production of basic needs is often more significant than the destruction of the natural balance that these proposals promise. It is particularly striking that the conflicts are often notably more acrimonious when they involve proposals that might contribute to reducing global environmental damages but without any notable contribution to mitigation of these problems locally!

In general, however, the principal contrast that these communities offer in comparison with the dominant consumption and production patterns of the global economy is in the concept of 'enough' and the nature of the political and economic systems in control. Most indigenous groups organise themselves to assure an adequate diet based on traditional ingredients that are produced locally or available through trade with their partner organisations; these networks of exchange have long been an essential part of their means for acquiring parts of their diet or other products.[6] Martínez Luna's (2023) characterisation of the interaction among communities involves much more than the exchange of goods, for it also encompasses spiritual and cultural facets of life that contribute to the consolidation of collaborative efforts that transform their individual acts of resistance into collective strategies for building the new societies that they are consciously attempting to consolidate.

The contrast with degrowth

Indigenous perspectives on organising their societies and their relationship to nature are firmly grounded in their cosmovisions. Theirs is a complex set of beliefs and organising principles that

guide them to a dynamic relationship with the countries in which they live but also to a way of life dramatically different from that of those societies. To begin with, there is the matter of the way in which production itself is organised: although the degrowth literature addresses the problem of 'overproduction', it generally does not sufficiently address the question of who would organise production and the installations for its realisation. This elides one of the key origins of the need for growth: the never-ending drive for accumulation by the owners of the enterprises inherent in private ownership, as well as the need for production to assure their viability. This growth is essential for maintaining the economic health of the global market system, assuring not only the flow of necessities but also the superficial excesses of the system along with the employment so necessary to guarantee the ability of the population to survive. Engagement with indigenous peoples, with their experiences and activities, would reinforce degrowth's focus on such fundamental questions.

In contrast, many of the communities we are describing are strengthening their traditional process for the organisation of production, even when their individual members assume responsibility for implementation. The collective organisation of the process and the local events for exchanges among community members is complemented by the regular organisation of encounters with other communities and the promotion of systematic mechanisms for trade with those that are not in the immediate vicinity. A central characteristic of this process is the commitment that nobody in the community be left out or deprived of the basic set of goods needed for an adequate quality of life within the community.

Just as important, however, is the concern with the care of the territory and the attention to the spiritual and cultural activities that are an integral part of community cohesion. These facets of indigenous organisation are central to the shared experience. It is evident in the individual responsibilities to participate in collective activities, such as the maintenance of basic infrastructures and the care for community institutions and buildings, called *tequio* in many parts of Mexico. This is firmly engrained in collective chores as is the responsibility to participate in community assemblies, considered to be the maximum organ for decision-making and assuring the accountability of the leadership. These processes, including partaking in the ceremonial activities, also play an important part in assuring the gradual equalisation of wealth among members, since those who are prospering more than others are expected to share their good fortunes by providing important parts of the costs for these celebrations.

In sum, many indigenous and rural community societies in Latin America are actively involved in shaping a world in which there is a balance between their own demands and their impacts on the regions in which they live. The integral interrelationship between society and nature is not a straitjacket they impose on themselves but rather an expression of the symbiotic interaction reflecting the unity that derives from their cosmovisions, a result that is an essential part of building the many new worlds that will enable them to continue confronting the challenges posed by the globalised societies in which they are located.

Notes

1 This term was coined by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), who collaborated with a large group of social scientists to create a school of 'world systems' scholars, much of whose work has been published in the *Journal of World Systems Research*. Following years of debate, the group recognised the significance of the persistence of these resistance movements among indigenous and rural peoples around the world, offering their analysis of the significance of 'anti-systemic movements' (Arrighi et al. 1989).

2 This is a point central to the recounting of the 'peoples without history' by Eric Wolf (1982).

3 Spiritual degrowth work left undeveloped includes work by French-Algerian Pierre Rabhi who, in 2002, unsuccessfully attempted to stand as a French presidential candidate in order to promote degrowth more widely (Marsden 2002) and Fabrice Flipo – who are among those that Schneider et al. (2010, p. 512) identify with a 'fourth source' of degrowth within discussions of '"the meaning of life" and movements around it emphasising spirituality, non-violence, art or voluntary simplicity'.
4 The expression "good life" or "buen vivir" in Spanish, emerged as a translation of the Andean phrase "Sumak Kawsay" (in Quechua), a corpus of the millenary beliefs and traditions that refers to the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples living on the western slopes of the mountainous range in South America. It became widely known after being incorporated into the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia at the beginning of the present century (Esteva et al. 2013; Lang and Mokrani 2013; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2014).
5 This unity of society and nature was a controversial assertion in Western scholarship when proposed by French anthropologist Descola (2013). Indigenous communities around the world had long been vociferous and eloquent in asserting their intimate interrelationships with the planet and all of its component parts. The subsequent proliferation of literature advancing this perspective is testimony to the changing balance of sensibilities in this matter – see, for example, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017), de la Cadena and Blaser (2018), and Esteva (2019) for poignant examples.
6 Cossens (2019) makes a strong case for the importance of trade among pre-conquest peoples in Mesoamerica dating back at least 3,800 years. These exchanges not only involved valuable ornaments but also goods that were important for daily life. The regional and international alliances that communities are participating in today are probably far more varied, as evidenced by the experiences of the members of the Territories of Life consortium.

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13

DEGROWTH IN AN AFRICAN PERIPHERY

From necrocapitalism to a pluriverse of nowtopias

Roland Ngam

African origins of modern wealth: slavery and the plantation complex

Africa has interacted and traded with the rest of the world for thousands of years (Xinfeng 2023; Davidson 1999). The racist dismissal of African history as non-existent and the depiction of Africans as unregenerate heathens is a fairly modern reality, engineered by adventurers, travel writers and Judeo-Christian monarchies intent on stealing the continent's wealth. Through the exotic depictions of Africans, European mass consciousness bought wholeheartedly into the idea that Black people were not imbued with the same type of multidimensional rights, feelings, culture and sophisticated thought that White people enjoyed. Because they were presented as monodimensional heathens, they could be bought, sold, yoked like chattel and put to work in fields, factories and mines. The idea of capturing Africans and forcing them into perpetual servitude was approved at the highest level of European civilised society by Pope Nicolas V – the paragon of Christianity and spiritual godfather of most of the continent's catholic monarchies – when he issued the *Dum Diversas* papal bull (1452).

The *Dum Diversas* opened the floodgates for centuries of transatlantic slave trade. Chattel slavery started the system of shifting African labour *en masse* to the Americas. It was a thoroughly modern socio-economic system and, at one time, the bodies of enslaved Africans were the single biggest financial asset in America (Lockart 2019). It was driven by massive business interests with hundreds of thousands of subscribers who made profits beyond their wildest dreams. Chattel slavery played a key role in developing valuable commodities such as rice and cotton in the United States (US), coffee and sugar in Haiti and Barbados, silver in Potosí, Peru–Bolivia, gold in Minas Gerais (Brazil) and even Asian manufacturing capacity for consumer goods destined for Africa. To paraphrase John Stuart Mill, with colonialism a faraway island and London could become a single economic entity (Rodney 2022, p. 101). Slavery propelled the US from a primary agricultural colony to the biggest industrial power in the world, and some monarchies in Europe (Spain, Portugal, France, Brandenburg-Prussia) from small entities to global actors.

When slavery ended, proprietarian sacralisation meant that former slave owners had to be compensated (Piketty 2020). In England the Slavery Abolition Act of 1933 awarded 47,000 former slave owners over £20 million, or 40 per cent of the budget of the United Kingdom (UK) at the time (Piketty 2021; French 2021, p. 222). Elsewhere, when the Haitians rebelled against slavery

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and kicked out the French, King Charles X forced the Haitian government to pay former slave owners a compensation of 150 mn gold Francs or face a war with France. Freed slaves did not receive a dime for the injustices and indignities that they had suffered. On the contrary, schemes were devised to ensure that they remained reliant on their former owners' properties.

Emergence of market capitalism: from the plantation complex to colonies

Whereas slavery had operated on a delicate system of treaties with and purchases from key allies (such as Jollof, Dahomey, Oyo, Kongo and Ndongo), colonialism instituted a completely new hierarchy and system of relationships. Africans became beasts of burden right where they were born, in Africa. People constantly needed to be forced away from their homes and families to produce commodities in latifundia, plantations and mines. Caste systems and class hierarchies were introduced where they did not exist before (Cabral 1973). Race was the defining factor with regard to who held the top positions and who obeyed orders. Even in colonies where Blacks and Whites had lived and worked together – sometimes with Whites working under the command of Blacks, as was the case with the Sierra Leonean Kings College-trained medical doctor James Horton Africanus – colonialism decreed that no Black could have a higher position than a White man in Africa (Davidson 1999). Heteronormative laws were applied across the board. Rich ways of living, loving, sexuality, body modification, scarification and tattooing were labelled unchristian and devil worship. Indigenous concepts of sustainability, co-operation and commoning were thrown out the window. To admit that they were there would certainly have been an admission of deliberate structure and organisation.

Commodity production in the colonies, just like the slave trade, was typically managed by charter companies – incorporated business entities in Europe with a large shareholder base that received royal charters to trade with and/or do business with foreign territories. Shareholders (subscribers) were typically the patriciate or hereditary peers (such as princes and princesses, dukes, rich merchants, earls, counts, viscounts and barons). This is very important – although documents always present only the Belgian Congo as King Leopold's personal property, most of Africa at one point was the personal property of hundreds of thousands of European individuals or private companies and it led to their eventual prosperity. Some of the most important charter companies and their imperial and nationalising impacts are listed in Table 13.1. Through these business interests, modern iterations of charter companies still own valuable assets in many African countries. At one point, they owned more than 80 per cent of all land in Southern Africa (Ngam 2021). With colonialism, Africa became an extension, or appendage, of global capital.

The periphery laboured and died under slave conditions; the centre enjoyed the wealth. Strict daily quotas had to be met. Those who attempted to run away from forced labour projects were summarily executed and someone else promptly found to replace them on the conveyor belt. The modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo, which King Leopold of Belgium claimed as his personal property, is perhaps the most extreme case of production enforcement. There, deserters or Africans who did not meet their daily production quota of rubber or other commodities had all or part of their limbs chopped off with a machete. By the time Ann Seeley Harris published the famous photo of the unfortunate villager Nsala Wala staring as if in a trance at his daughter's severed hands – to raise awareness on the atrocities that were taking place in the Congo – at least 10 mn people had been killed. Tom Phillips (2019, p. 179) has described colonialism as 'a mutilatory for-profit holocaust of slave labour'. He adds that European colonialism caused around 50 mn deaths in the 20th century 'placing it up there with the crimes of Hitler, Stalin and Mao – and that isn't in the century that the colonial empire was collapsing' (Phillips 2019, p. 174).

Table 13.1 Impacts of charter companies operating across Africa.

Charter companies	Significant operations and impacts
Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa (Royal African Company, and later, African Company of Merchants)	impacted on Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria
The Royal Niger Company	eventually created Nigeria
The German East Africa Company	created Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and parts of Kenya
The German West Africa Company	created and ran businesses in Cameroon and Togo
The Casa da Guiné e Mina	traded with many countries on the West African coast
The Brandenburg African Company	ran businesses in modern-day Ghana
The Dutch East India Company founded the Dutch Cape Colony	now the seat of the South African parliament (Western Cape)
The British South Africa Company (BSAC) and Royal Charter of the British South Africa Company	were used to create South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe
The Compagnie des Sultanats du Haut-Oubangui; Société Commerciale, Industrielle et Agricole du Haut-Ogoué; Société du Haut-Ogooué; and Compagnie Minière de l'Ogoué	created Gabon and the Central African Republic
The Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale (CFAO)	created French West Africa (Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger)
King Leopold, Compagnie Francaise du Bas Congo, ABIR, Anversoise, Katanga Trust & Kasai Trust	created the Democratic Republic of Congo

Africa's environment suffered just as much as its people. It became an extraction site that did not need to rest or recover. All kinds of ways were deployed to ensure that the African soil, subsoil and oceans gave up all the wealth they carried. Railway tracks were built in the most fertile areas to ferry out commodities. The continent's rich diversity was sacrificed for sugar plantations, cocoa farms and plantations, cotton fields, corn fields and so on. The metabolic rift introduced by imperialist expansion through large-scale commercial farms, deforestation, rapid urbanisation, fossil fuel extraction and large mining operations created mass collapse and extinction. Elephants were hunted for their tusks and lions for their hides. Impunity led to a new way of dealing with exhaustion. Instead of giving the earth time to rest and renew itself, the new socio-metabolic regime had inventions such as fertilisers and pesticides or simply abandoned sacrifice zones for new virgin territory.

Not yet Uhuru: the neo-colonial system

When the clamour for independence grew too loud to be ignored, colonial masters systematically pushed out or eliminated the main voices that called for a complete break from the Global North, such as the voices of Patrice Emery Lumumba (Congo), Reuben Um Nyobe (Cameroon), Kwame

Nkrumah (Ghana) and Amilcar Cabral (Guinea Bissau). Where they could not get the leaders out of power, for example Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, the French colonial system shipped every piece of equipment out of the country and poured salt in the fields to render them barren. Leaders who later developed a conscience were also replaced by the most efficient machines that European powers had put in place – the army. This explains the phenomenon of coups in Africa.

The consequences of connecting colonial Africa to the global economy through an asymmetric relationship have had devastating consequences. 'The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty', writes Nkrumah (1965, p. ix) in *Neocolonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, adding that '[i]n reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside'. The former colonial power still dictates monetary policy, trade regimes and, sometimes, it maintains a direct military presence in the former colony. In the case of Francophone African countries, since 1945 France has controlled the currency of all its African countries (except Guinea) through the CFA cooperation treaties *Communauté Financière en Afrique* (West Africa) and *Coopération Financière en Afrique* (Central Africa). Both treaties require African countries to keep half of their foreign exchange reserves at the French Public Treasury. France argues, of course, that this is an altruistic gesture intended to help provide stability to its African partners.

Today, 'democratic' processes across large swathes of Africa are purely cosmetic, designed to convince the international community that it is a continent where accepted principles of statehood and human rights are followed. The motivation is that the existence of such institutions is required for systems of exploitation to continue working, under a veneer of legitimacy of course. The former colonial entities and its enforcers can organise as many elections as the international community and former colonial powers want, when they want it, and there will always be the same outcome: victory for the 'owned' incumbent party. This is why Jaramogi Oginga Odinga once famously wrote that Africa is not yet Uhuru (independent).

The global economic downturn of the 1970s created multiple crises in Africa due to an unhealthy dependence on primary commodities. Development finance institutions (DFIs) ordered many African countries to adopt austerity structural adjustment plan (SAP) measures that further opened the continent's markets to an avalanche of goods and services from foreign countries. The deregulation and austerity that accompanied SAPs is arguably the most devastating tragedy to befall Africa in the modern era. Following the implementation of SAPs, Africa suddenly became a net exporter of revenue (Mkandawire 2005). Its agriculture collapsed and has remained dependent on foreign aid ever since. African countries' receipts from customs duties fell to less than 4 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the 1990s and to less than 3 per cent in the 2010s (Piketty 2020, p. 695). The rapid deindustrialisation that has come with free market policies significantly weakens Africa's capacity to grow at a level consistent enough to attract the liquidity that it requires to build infrastructure for its growing population. DFIs now recognise that they have often used inadequate matrices to measure African countries' capacity to pay back the loans that they contract – scant consolation to nations whose educated elites left the continent in droves for greener pastures so their countries are even more dependent both on primary commodities and on foreign capital markets (Monga 2023).

The global polycrisis of market capitalism: *Homo economicus* and the environment

The word 'globalisation' is a deceptive anomaly used widely every day. It conveys the idea that we are still working towards the attainment of this state in some near or distant future, whereas

we are already in a global age with a global economy, global financial systems, sports, culture, technology, cuisine and much more. A large part of the world lives, eats and behaves in the same ways. Large sections of Los Angeles, Accra, Port Louis, Johannesburg, London, Zagreb and many other cities look the same. Through supermarketisation, 'IKEAization' and McDonaldisation we shop from the same outlets. With the global sprawl of satellites, we also consume the same media (such as CNN, BBC, France 24, Deutsche Welle and CCTV). The rise of new media was supposed to democratise how we consume media, but the dominance of Microsoft, Google and Apple – and social networks such FB, X, Instagram and TikTok – instead confirm a continuing trend towards super monopolies. The world has become so mind-numbingly uniform and boring that the Wachowskis posited in their movie *Matrix* that all human beings are programmed assets living in one giant matrix.

It is easy to see how we got here: colonialism, market capitalism and cultural hegemony. Deregulation and free market policies have led to a super-crisis of corporations that often exist everywhere and nowhere in particular. The bewildering number of operations enabled by the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications ('SWIFT'), drop-shipping transportation logistics, and tax havens makes it difficult to pin down precisely where corporations operate or stash their cash. For some countries, following the money is an impossible task. With dizzying speed, faceless entities bet on currencies or commodities, spot sell, transfer the proceeds into listed companies, withdraw, bet some more and then – just like that – the profits vanish into some tax haven. What is even more devastating, these financial systems work around the clock.

As Vandana Shiva (2019, p. 6) puts it: 'Finance is now substituted for capital, with tools and technologies that allow the rich to accumulate wealth as "rentiers" while doing nothing'. The focus has completely shifted from producing daily needs and future generations to the production of objects for exchange (Salleh 2000, p. 31). Built-in obsolescence has been normalised. Where thousands of producers existed before, today consumers have become the slaves of a handful of monopolies who can, at short notice, create artificial scarcity, make huge profits and recreate equilibrium as if there was nothing wrong in the first place, with often lenient punishments from governments. Surveillance and attention capitalism constantly exploit the ubiquity of mobile phones to identify predictive data and brain chemistry that can be sold for cash. There is no hiding place. They pry and prey on people's lives and vulnerabilities around the clock, making suggestions, emptying bank accounts. Elsewhere, hotel fridges are no longer just fridges: they are 24-hour shops.

Disasters and crises are good for business. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, billionaires and multimillionaires saw their wealth surge to unprecedented levels. In 2022 alone, oil and gas companies made an unprecedented US$400 billion in profits (Milman 2023). This is the age of the quadrillionaire. Corporate impunity has caused the wealth gap between the rich and the poor to reach unprecedented levels. According to the *World Inequality Report* (Chancel et al. 2022), the gap between the average incomes of the top 10 per cent and the bottom 50 per cent has almost doubled over the past 50 years. CEO salaries and other payments are out of control (Bivens and Kandra 2022). The richest 10 per cent of the global population officially own 76 per cent of all wealth while the poorest 50 per cent owns barely 2 per cent of the total according to data in the 2022 *World Inequality Report* (Chancel et al. 2022).

There is a constant mantra to let the private sector get on with it. With the dispersal of investments and production systems all over the world, it is often impossible to police exactly how much profit multinational corporations are making or how much they owe in taxes. According to the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP 2017), Apple corporation made over US$252 billion in offshore profits on which it paid no taxes in the US (where it was founded), by shifting major profits to three subsidiaries in Ireland.

Ecce homo! Homo economicus on his knees

We are witnessing the demise of *Homo economicus* in real time. Everywhere, workers are exhausted, tired, broken. The frenetic rhythm of *métro-boulot-dodo* (commute-work-sleep) repeat used to lead at least to a house in the suburbs, but it does not anymore. Young people can no longer afford to leave home. They are living with their parents well into their thirties, and sometimes, forties. Full-time workers cannot afford to eat one good meal a day. In top G20 economies, like the US and Germany, there is a major paradox of people who have full-time jobs yet cannot pay their rent at the end of the month or even afford a full month's commute to and from work. As Mbembe (2020, p. 32) writes, capital 'has captured the world's very depths, often leaving behind vast fields of debris and toxins, wasted humans afflicted with sores, cankers and boils'.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us which workers are truly essential for the survival of the global economy: nurses, teachers, caregivers and security personnel. At the height of the pandemic, the vast majority of today's top CEOs and consultants who live in exclusive gated communities were trapped in their lavish mansions, twiddling their thumbs. It turns out that they were not that special after all. The essential workers ensured our collective survival and sanity. Yet, the pandemic has ended and the world has gone back to business as usual.

After years of absorbing abusive behaviour from corporations, there are numerous signs that the world can no longer tolerate capitalism's contradictions. The Gilets Jaunes movement and 2023–2024 farmer protests across Europe are perhaps the most visible representations of this *ras-le-bol*. Priscilla Ludosky started the Gilets Jaunes protests on 29 May 2018 when she issued a petition calling for tax rebates on essential goods. Farmers are upset not only about the growing muscle of supermarkets that keep eating into their margins but also foreign imports even in cases where local production is still dynamic. The guillotines are going to come back. The world is, in fact, just waiting for a spark. The political class has found, and will continue to find, much to their chagrin that the exploited can mobilise quickly through social media such as X and TikTok.

Africa, of course, knows all about starting a bonfire under corrupt systems. The so-called Arab Spring was sparked by a young man, Mohamed Bouazizi, when he set himself alight in Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia) on 17 December 2010 after a police officer confiscated his vegetable cart. Although the anger of the Arab Spring was ultimately diffused by regime changes and stimulus measures, future mass protests may not necessarily end in similar half-hearted measures. Africa's Coup Belt has produced seven coups since 2019. West Africa's environment, which had been heating up much greater than the global average, is exhausted and cannot feed its population. This calls for a more prominent role by governments. The solution by new coup leaders and their Russian allies has been to blame Francafrique (French neo-colonialism). However, beyond fiery rhetoric against France, they have few good ideas to move their countries forward.

A broken, exhausted environment

Humanity currently faces a triple planetary disaster according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 2022) and another polycrisis takes the form of climate change, air pollution and biodiversity loss. Katherine Richardson et al. (2023, p. 1) frame the planetary crises in terms of nine boundaries – climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater change, biogeochemical flows, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol loading, stratospheric ozone depletion and novel entities. These boundaries are critical for maintaining the stability and resilience of the Earth system. We have crossed six, nearly seven, of them – increasing the likelihood of more severe weather events. Within the Anthropocene, the world has emitted over

3.67 trillion tonnes of CO_2, of which one trillion tonnes is carbon (Allen et al. 2009) while, in the 1950s, the world was emitting roughly 6 billion tonnes of CO_2.

Greenhouse gas emissions do not respect man-made borders so anthropogenic activity in one country affects the rest of the world. The countries that bear the biggest responsibility for the majority of CO_2 emissions include the US, Canada, Western Europe, India and China, which together are responsible for over 70 per cent of all emissions since 1850. The most polluting economic sectors include mining and fossil fuel extraction, agriculture and heavy industries like cement and fertiliser manufacturing (Chancel et al. 2022, p. 117). Per capita CO_2 emissions in the Global North are close to 20t per person per annum (Chancel et al. 2022, p. 118). In Africa, they are less than 3t per person per annum. Africa's annual CO_2 emissions account for less than 4 per cent of global emissions and yet it is the continent most affected by it.

Although there is agreement that something needs to be done to curb global warming, decisive action to resolve the problem has been bogged down by determinism and, sometimes, forceful obstructionism or greenwashing. At the Conference of the Parties (COP21) in Paris (2015), the parties agreed to pursue efforts to limit global warming at 1.5ºC on a principle of common but differentiated responsibility. This decision was informed by research of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which showed that we had about 300 billion tonnes of CO_2 left to limit global warming at 1.5ºC and 900 billion tonnes left to limit warming at 2ºC. The parties also agreed to raise US$100 billion annually from public and private sources to help developing nations achieve their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), adaption, mitigation, and more recently, loss and damage priorities.

The US$100 billion has never materialised, as the global stocktake at COP28 in Dubai (2023) confirmed. The United Nations Environmental Programme's *The Closing Window* report (UNEP 2022, p. xvi) revealed that there is no credible pathway to 1.5ºC because NDCs from COP26 were achieving only an annual reduction range of 0.5 gigatons (Gt) of CO_2 equivalent ($GtCO_2e$). The report also stated that 'policies currently in place with no additional action are projected to result in global warming of 2.8°C over the twenty-first century', so the world would need to cut emissions by at least 23 $GtCO_2e$ from 2030 to limit global warming at 1.5°C or effect a 5Gt CO_2e reduction to cap warming at 2°C (UNEP 2022, p. xvi).

Centring degrowth, and the pluriverse: healthy living in a healthy planet

The idea that we have to live according to the planet's budget is not new. Across the world, many communities have always lived according to the principle that one should take only what one requires from nature at any given time and leave the rest either for others or for the future. Through art, song, dance and socialising, people were constantly warned to build their existence on this reality. In ancient Greece for example, theatre was used to warn people against hubris (Serge Latouche, cited in Boucaud-Victoire 2019).

Currently, economic activity is mainly geared towards enriching the few. In 'The economics of the coming Spaceship Earth' (1966), Kenneth Boulding (1966) wrote that in a world 'without unlimited reservoirs of anything', human beings have to consider growth differently. Similarly, Georgescu-Roegen argued in 'Energy and economic myths' (1975) that mankind has a stock of finite resources and, therefore, every action ultimately leads to a depletion of that stock. For this reason, he continues, economics will ultimately have to merge into ecology because we have to be more aware of distributing mankind's ecology across generations. Creating a world of fairness and balance is the central thrust of degrowth.

Degrowth is a family of socio-economic philosophies which posit that we need to transition away from the destructive obsession with GDP growth in order to bring our existence in line with the earth's biophysical resources and the well-being of workers, all of this while ensuring that the sum total of the wealth we produce can be enjoyed more equally by all of the earth's inhabitants. In the article 'La décroissance ou le sens des limites' Serge Latouche (2016) argued that in a world where economics has invaded all spaces – our lives, our dreams, our sports, our conversations and so on – man needs to rediscover a sense of limits in order to save human civilisation. In an interview in *Marianne* (Boucaud-Victoire 2019) Latouche also posited that ending production for the sake of production required a decolonisation of the imaginary. Like Latouche, André Gorz (2010) wrote in his seminal 1974 essay *Leur Ecologie et la nôtre* that the world needed a socio-economic and cultural revolution that would abolish the pillars of capitalism under its current form and introduce a new relationship between man, his community, environment and nature.

For Jason Hickel (2021) degrowth is a 'critique of the mechanisms of colonial appropriation, enclosure and cheapening that underpin capitalist growth itself'. Hickel (2022, p. 1105) emphasises that the call to move away from GDP growthmania specifically targets a reduction of throughput. John Bellamy Foster (2023) agrees with this view, adding that 'degrowth specifically targets the most opulent sectors of the world population'. The Global North bears the biggest responsibility for changing the current productivist logic for three reasons. First, it is the main architect and driver of market capitalism. Second, it is responsible for more than 90 per cent of all annual CO_2 emissions. Third, it owes the rest of the world a massive debt: financial, moral and ecological.

The financial debt highlights some outrageous facts. African nations often have to borrow money at rates that are eight times higher than what Germany pays (Fofack 2024). Borrowing by these countries is often necessitated by deregulation or austerity policies imposed on them by development partners. Too many countries are swimming against the tide and cannot invest in essential services like water, education and health following or within structural adjustment. A large share of their budgets go to service debts owed to the Paris Club and others. At the 2024 Summit of the Future, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva called this 'a reverse Marshall Plan' (UN Affairs 2024). Interestingly, Thomas Sankara used the same words at the 1987 Organisation of African Unity Heads of State Summit. Sankara (1987) argued that debt was a skilfully managed reconquest of Africa, a situation that could lead to social unrest. Although Sankara was assassinated eight months later, calls for debt cancellation have only continued to grow. The Bridgetown Initiative, championed by the Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley, as well as the 2023 Africa Climate Summit, are only two of many processes recently set up by Global South nations and entities to demand cancellation and urgent decisive action to reform the international financial architecture.

Degrowth is not necessarily a requiem for manufacturing on planet Earth. Many critics, on both the left and the right, have been dismissive of degrowth, accusing its proponents of encouraging Luddism, collapse porn, primitivism, preindustrial agrarian economies and so on. They agree that capitalism is deeply flawed but follow up by saying that the best way to fix it is to evolve to eco-modernism, left-modernism or Prometheanism, all different scenarios where improvements to machines evolve more efficient work processes, giving us more time to do the things that we want (Ståle Holgersen 2023).

Others, including voices in the Global South, believe that degrowth is the project of middle-class academics and activists in the Global North (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019). Central to this argument is the idea that degrowth conjures images of austerity, colonialism, eurocentrism and even

neopaternalism. For Huber (2023), instead of a transition towards degrowth, socialism should capture and reform capitalism:

> it would be quite sad to build a socialist movement capable of seizing the means of production only to prohibit from the outset the further development of the productive forces. Socialism is not stasis. What about fusion power? Curing cancer?

Moreover, Driscoll (2024) argues that decarbonisation requires 'one last economic boom'. The problem with many such counterarguments is that the axiomatic assumptions upon which they are built mirror normative ideas about capitalism, similar to Margaret Thatcher's *there is no alternative*. In other words, capitalism is still the compass through which they view everything, a reflection of the poverty of thought from which Latouche says we should move away. Obviously, and as Latouche acknowledges (2016), the degrowth movement almost commits epistemic suicide from the beginning with its choice of name. However, he and others believe that the word 'degrowth' is useful as a missile word to shock people and get their attention (Hickel 2022). Latouche (in Boucaud-Victoire 2019) argues that those who insist on equating degrowth with negative growth (recession) are ill-intentioned and deliberately do not admit that they understand exactly what the concept stands for.

Ultimately, degrowth evolves in a dialectic of climate justice, and we can make the case for its implementation in a manner that is easier for people to understand without even using the word. If we agree that hegemonic market processes are underpinned by necrocapitalism that is constantly preying on people and planet for profit, then the alternative that we all seek will look a lot like degrowth. Georgescu-Roegen (1975, pp. 377–8) proposed a number of key fixes for the world in 1975, paraphrased as follows:

1. A complete prohibition of all instruments of war.
2. Supporting underdeveloped countries to arrive as quickly as possible at a good (not luxurious) life.
3. Lowering the global population so that it can be adequately fed only by organic agriculture.
4. All waste of energy should be carefully avoided and, if necessary, strictly avoided until solar energy and controlled fusion are the norm.
5. We must wean ourselves of the morbid craving for extravagant gadgetry.
6. We must get rid of fashion.
7. It is necessary that durable goods be made still more durable.
8. We should get away from the obsession of creating machines that make us spend more time working.

This list is essentially a degrowth manifesto. Recently, John Bellamy Foster (2023) and Max Ajl (2021) made similar arguments about dangerous, toxic or unnecessary activities that humanity should abandon and the positive ones that should take their place – suggestions paraphrased in Table 13.2. Seen from this light, degrowth offers a prosperous way forward for all. The more we look at things from this viewpoint, the more the concept becomes popular, especially among people who have a hard time looking beyond the word degrowth itself.

Towards a new post-growth internationalism

A degrowth agenda would be pointless unless it is honest and complete. From an African perspective, the beginning of a truly honest and useful degrowth agenda must necessarily include

Table 13.2 Key areas for divestment and investment. Drawing on Foster (2023) and Ajl (2021).

Divest from	**Invest in**
Endless, pointless wars and the military-industrial complex	Peace and stability, stronger states and regional institutions
Unfriendly cities that are not walkable	Cities with walkways, open-air workout areas, cyclable streets, quality, affordable public transportation
Fossil fuels	Green energy sources
Advertising, fast fashion, built-in obsolescence	Durable goods and local artisans who supply most of our needs
Unsustainable working conditions	Shorter work weeks and greater investment in products that matter
Supermarketisation, agriculture monopolies and global value chains	Democratised production and distribution systems; shorter value chains
Factory farms and agrochemical monopolies	Agroecology and more decentralised food production
Poorly regulated finance institutions, biased lending, poorly regulated trade, free-trade in goods that can be produced locally	Greater transparency in how financial institutions and tax processes operate; more balanced negotiation of trade deals

reparations. In the *Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon (2004 [1963], p. 53) writes that 'Europe's well-being and progress were built with the sweat and corpses of blacks, Arabs, Indians, and Asians'. Clearly, such an investigation would lead us to the conclusion that degrowth must include a reparations agenda. When Georgescu-Roegen wrote in 1975 that rich nations must help poorer nations to quickly reach a level of comfortable living in order to help save the planet, he was obviously not referring to reparations. However, as the empire writes back, currently it is saying that what needs to flow to the Global South is not charity. It is theirs by right. Campaigns such as 'Rhodes Must Fall' in Southern Africa and the anti-Franc CFA movement in West and Central Africa show that Africans are already engaging critically with the colonial roots of capitalism. The calls for fair reparations are only going to grow louder.

Second, a new internationalism must create collaborative partnerships to hold accountable for their actions those corporations that have unleashed unprecedented amounts of CO_2 into the atmosphere. Modern value chains are often dispersed, and accountability involves doing two things. On the one hand, it must become everybody's business to know what farmers receive for their labour, how mining contracts are negotiated, where our meat comes from, who produces our cheap sweatshirts and so on. We must end a world where workers in the Global South continue to endure abuses and exploitation in order to feed the Global North's addiction to cheap food, fast fashion and technology. Even now, within the 'just transition' the hundreds of thousands of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo who spend their days digging for cobalt and other minerals are destroying both their future and the planet in order to provide the Global North with cheap resources. When the Global North is done playing with the cheap electronics and fast fashion that was initially produced in thousands of factories in the Global South, the waste is once again dumped in the Global South in countries like Ghana, Uganda, Cameroon and Kenya. That has to change.

At the same time, we also need strong collaborations between movements in the Global North and their counterparts in the Global South that work to make sure that what is advertised as 'fair trade' is indeed fair. One cannot overemphasise this point, given the horror stories of exploitation that are published every day, from the cocoa plantations of Cote d'Ivoire to the Kenyan companies that provide back-end services for tech companies like Open AI. A lot of the fair trade that is advertised in Western media every day is far from fair. It is only by working together and shining the spotlight on corruption and abuses in a sustained way that we can change these injustices and channel more resources to the people who produce the goods and services that we need.

In terms of positing post-growth alternatives, some thinkers have chosen to focus on a decolonial 'pluriverse' of nowtopias that often exist in and of themselves without necessarily being the consequence or rejection of capitalism. Ashish Kothari et al. (2019) present many of these ideas in *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. Africa has a rich culture of indigenous cultures that still exist in many communities. Some of them, like Ubuntu (*I am because you are*), are fairly well-known, but others, not so much. Vodun, for example, is an African philosophy that has promoted well-being, justice and peace in parts of West Africa for centuries. Although Vodun entered mainstream language through Hollywood and is commonly associated with witchcraft, the reality could not be farther from this. The foundational principle of Vodun is that everything is spirit, everything has life, and therefore, if you do harm to others, including nature, you do it to yourself. Vodun is also credited with offering a strong sense of unity among Black people during the Haitian Revolution. Just like Vodun, many other African belief systems, including *Pulaaku* (the life philosophy of the Fula) and *Osotua* (the Maasai life code) promote ecocentric ontologies for a just and fair management of the god-man-nature continuum that ensures the survival of all.

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PART III

Degrowth practices

Concepts in action

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14

CONVIVIALITY AND COMMONING

Andrea Vetter and Matthias Fersterer

Here and now – conviviality and commoning as roots of degrowth

The closely intertwined ideas and practices of conviviality and commoning are crucial parts of the degrowth strategy of creating nowtopias (Schmelzer et al. 2022). Creating and maintaining nowtopian spaces is an important part of the prefigurative politics inherent in degrowth politics and practices – not using wrong means to reach right ends but matching means and ends, making them indistinguishable while anticipating them here and now, however sketchy, fallible and embryonic. Commoning and conviviality provide practices, patterns and tools for creating, maintaining and multiplying such spaces.

Conviviality: freedom realised in interdependence

Conviviality is one of the core principles of practising and theorising degrowth (Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. ix, 2–3). After all, one of the movement's foundational texts proclaimed, 'Down with sustainable development! Long live convivial degrowth!' (Latouche 2002, Chapter 24, this volume; Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). In the sense used today, 'conviviality' (from Latin, *con-vivere* – 'living together') was coined by cultural critic and philosopher Ivan Illich (1926–2002), who is considered a degrowth pioneer (Paquot 2020). Diametrically opposed to 'industrial productivity', Illich (1973, p. 11) defined 'conviviality' as follows:

> I intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realised in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value.

If conviviality is 'individual freedom realised in personal interdependence' what, then, is the relation between 'conviviality' and 'freedom'? This is an important question for every degrowth discourse, because one of the main criticisms levelled from a neoliberal perspective is to accuse degrowth of threatening individual freedom, or with potentially becoming authoritarian. This has

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to do with the fact that, as political scientist Joan Tronto (2013, p. 92) pointedly wrote, in (neo-) liberal contexts, 'freedom means not having to care'. She argues instead for a 'caring democracy' where freedom means the opposite – 'A truly free society makes people free to care' (Tronto 2013, p. 170). This is in line with feminist degrowth perspectives, proposing a decommodification and commonising of care work (Dengler and Lang 2022). In contrast to this understanding of freedom, Mario Deriu (2015, p. 80) – in an entry on conviviality in D'Alisa et al. (2015) – wrote: '[c]onvivial tools for Illich are a condition for the realization of autonomy understood as the power to control resources and on the satisfaction of our own needs'. We read Illich differently and from a feminist perspective stress the aspect of interdependence and necessity in conviviality. We take 'convivial freedom' to mean being free to do here and now that which is necessary to create and sustain interrelatedness and hence interdependence. Anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2011, p. 203) supports this understanding of freedom as the possibility to care for each other:

> As everywhere in the ancient world, to be "free" meant, first and foremost, not to be a slave. Since slavery means above all the annihilation of social ties and the ability to form them, freedom meant the capacity to make and maintain moral commitments to others. The English word "free," for instance, is derived from a German root meaning "friend," since to be free meant to be able to make friends, to keep promises, to live within a community of equals.

Current discussions of conviviality

In degrowth contexts, there are currently two major strands of theorising centred around conviviality, which both draw heavily on Illich's work. On the one hand, there is research on the appropriate technology and convivial tools needed for a degrowth transformation (Samerski 2018), for which co-author Vetter (2018, 2023) coined the term 'convivial technology'. Numerous researchers with various approaches from a great variety of fields have built upon this concept from a degrowth perspective. This ranges from circular economy/society and innovation (Genovese and Pansera 2021; Pansera and Fressoli 2021; Robra et al. 2023; Calisto et al. 2024), and eco-social design and technology development (Kostakis et al. 2023; Lizzaralde and Tyl 2018) to practical projects, such as the WikiHouse, agricultural open hardware or e-bikes (Priavolou and Niaros 2019; Bobulescu and Fritscheova 2021; Pantazis and Meyer 2020; Prescott 2023; Bradley and Emanuel 2024), and various aspects of digital sufficiency and artificial intelligence (Santarius et al. 2023; Guenot and Vetter 2022; Meyers 2024). (A more detailed discussion follows in 'Convivial technologies – commoning tech' later in the chapter.)

On the other hand, there has been a social movement by the name of 'convivialism' seeking to synthesise 'liberalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism' (Adloff 2014, p. 13). This movement has gained wider attention since the publication of the *Manifeste Convivialiste* and its translation into English (Les Convivialistes 2014). The manifesto, followed by a sequel in 2020, was penned by Les Convivialistes, a collective of more than 40 francophone intellectuals, among them Alain Caillé and Serge Latouche who are regarded as important figures for the early degrowth debate (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). Convivialism challenges utilitarist thinking and the belief that economic growth and development are prerequisites for prosperity and happiness, instead making a case for frugality and the quality of relationships on all levels of social organisation (as in Lazanyi et al. Chapter 23, this volume). The reader *Convivial Futures: Views*

from a Post-Growth Tomorrow edited by Adloff and Caillé (2022) brings together such perspectives from various degrowth aspects and areas.

There is, in fact, a third strand worth mentioning, even though the term 'conviviality' is rarely used for it. It is essentially concerned with a great variety of actors living together well – interspecies conviviality, explored for instance from biological perspectives focusing on symbiogenesis and autopoiesis. The latter concept, originally introduced by neurobiologists Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana in the 1970s, and since adopted by a great variety of disciplines from cybernetics to sociology and on to literary studies, explores at various levels – from the cellular to the organismic and on to the ecosystemic – a very similar spectrum between self-organisation (freedom) and coherence (interdependence) (Varela and Maturana 1980). In the early 1970s, evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis (1999) started to build upon earlier research on symbiogenesis – two or more entities merging to form a new coherent single one. Margulis established symbiosis as the most crucial factor to understanding the origin and evolution of species – '[e]very organism that can be assigned to a particular species . . . results from symbiosis' (Margulis and Sagan 2002). Sociologist Frank Adloff (2024, p. 258) explored the concept of symbiosis as a 'subcategory of conviviality'. Maya Hey (2023) has applied Illich's concept of conviviality to human-microbe symbiosis. In a reader edited by Bing Song and Yiwen Zhan (2024), the concepts *gongsheng* and *kyōsei* are both used to translate 'symbiosis' and 'conviviality' into Chinese and Japanese, respectively, and are explored from various angles, from (microbial) ecology to (human) social studies.

Commoning: relationality, love and direct action

Commoning and degrowth are two discursive fields that have several overlaps and intersections – be it by relating to the same practical examples, such as bicycle upcycling, midwifery or urban commons projects, or by explicitly naming commoning a transformative strategy for degrowth (Schmelzer et al. 2022, pp. 215–20; Commoning Beyond Growth undated). 'Commoning' (from Latin, *com-munus* – 'collaborative commitment') refers to the social practice of caring for, making use of and reproducing among equals, resources that are held in common – be it a plot of land, a community-supported agricultural project, an intentional community, a communal housing project, a social movement, an open-source item of software or hardware, and so on. Using the verb commoning does justice to the fact that a commons is essentially not a thing but a set of entangled relationships that become manifest in a given (re-)source of life. Commoning is an ongoing and, essentially, deeply ecological process of call and response between a multitude of human and more-than-human actors and their environment. There is no commons without commoning, as historian Peter Linebaugh (2008) famously put it. In *The Magna Carta Manifesto,* Linebaugh (2008, p. 279) further expands:

> To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.

However, commoning is more than just another way of organising ecological or embedded economic relations. It entails, in fact, its own ontology, its own way of being in the world. In contrast to the ontology of separation and competition prevailing in capitalist market economies and the

social Darwinist notion of the survival of the fittest, the ontology of commoning is characterised by trust in mutual aid and by interconnectedness, symbiosis, entanglement and conviviality.

Bearing upon the *Convivialist manifesto*, biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber (2015, p. 371f) points out the connection between commoning and conviviality:

> Thus, the commons describes an ontology of relations that is at the same time existential, economic and ecological. It emphasises a process of transformation and identity formation that arises out of a mutuality that is not only material, but also experienced. For humans, then, this ontology produces meaning and emotional reality. This process also encompasses what has recently been described as 'conviviality'.

This ontology entails close entanglements with actual places, 'centers of the world', as writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018) put it, where collaborative commitment between humans and non-humans is realised (Le Guin 1989 [1982], pp 82–85). In this respect commoning creates at-homeness, and its renaissance in the past two decades may, at least partly, be viewed as a countermovement to the (post-)modern human condition of being alienated and separated from the only home we will ever have – the all-encompassing, life-giving soil and dirt of planet Earth.

In contrast to the neoliberal conception of homo-oeconomicus, commons theorists David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (1958–2021) referred to a commoner as a 'nested-I', a being that is not only embedded in but constituted through relationships (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 41ff). One of the authors of this article conceptualised the central human actor of conviviality – in contrast to the 'rational man' that is the homo-economicus – as 'relational wo*man' (Vetter 2023, p. 68ff). Peter Linebaugh (2019, pp. 5, 221) qualifies this relationality even further by stating that it is 'love' that is foundational to the commons, as 'eros, philia, and agape propel the commons; they form the basis of community'.

According to design principles elaborated by Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012), a defining feature of a commons is 'collective-choice arrangements', in other words, that commoners may establish – and modify – among themselves the specific rules and practices according to which a given commons is tended and used (Ostrom 2015).

When talking about rules it is worth noting that there is a crucial difference between 'common rights' and 'legal rights'. Whereas the latter are granted by the state relying on hidden premises of mistrust, common rights fundamentally rely on trust and originate in their being exercised, that is, in the very act of commoning itself (Linebaugh 2008, p. 44ff). Legal structures can at most – and at best – recognise and protect commoning. Commoning, however, is based on self-organisation, subverting and transcending both the state and the market by prefiguring through direct action 'the genuinely free society one wishes to create' (Graeber 2007, p. 378).

Commoning, or conviviality, for that matter, is a way of organising human affairs that is diametrically opposed to contract theories, to private property, and hence to most theories of state. It is, in fact, contrary to fake universalist theories – laid down by educated white men such as Bernard de Mandeville, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke or John Rawls (from three centuries to eight decades ago) – that rely upon many hidden premises, starting with the distorted universalist notion that people should want to organise themselves by means of contracts (Vetter and Fersterer 2022). This is not to say that it may not be a worthwhile enterprise to design legal frameworks and provisions that do not impede but rather foster commoning and its preconditions. Creative legal interpretation can certainly protect nowtopias beset by constant threats of eviction and enclosure. However, contracts being foundational instruments to maintaining state and market powers and, as such, means

and not ends in themselves, they will only get us so far in prefiguring convivial commoning, which is all about matching means and ends.

The discourse on commoning was scaled to new heights of complexity and operationalisation with the publication of *Free, Fair and Alive* (Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Drawing on the work of architect-designer Christopher Alexander (1936–2022), Silke Helfrich and David Bollier laid the groundwork for a 'pattern language' of commoning. What exactly are these patterns? 'Patterns are a way of understanding the nature of order in the world', write Bollier and Helfrich (2019, p. 85) – 'They help us identify structural regularities and relationships among different types of [commoning]'. Patterns are not made up but distilled from socio-historical practice. They differ from principles inasmuch as they are context-bound, interconnected, and open to addition, so 'no pattern is complete unto itself' (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 85). (Find examples of patterns of commoning in practice in the 'Convivial technologies – Commoning in practice' section later in this chapter.)

Convivial technologies – commoning tech[1]

Given these wider explorations on conviviality and commoning, let us now turn to technology, which is the sphere where the concept of conviviality has gained most attention in degrowth. The relentless development of technology is not just a characteristic trait of modernity but rather an essential driving force of the growth-oriented industrial societies against which the degrowth movement stands. How can we challenge techno-fix ending up as technical totalitarianism (Latouche 2013)? The term 'convivial technologies' proposed by co-author Vetter (2018, 2023) sheds light upon technological dimensions and poses core questions suited for describing, criticising, recovering, and (re-)designing existing and yet-to-be-conceived technologies from a degrowth perspective.

Imperial technology

Diametrically opposed to 'convivial technology' is 'imperial technology' (Vetter 2021). Why call technologies designed to allegedly solve all our ecological problems by means of the religion of growth and innovation, 'imperial'? Because the resources needed for the production of technological infrastructures and devices – as well as the emissions created both by producing and using them – are externalised in space and time (Paulson 2024). In terms of space, the benefits go to the global middle and upper classes (Brand and Wissen 2021) while the downsides are borne by peripheral regions and poor people, mainly in the Global South (Ngam, Chapter 13, this volume). The Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade (EJOLT undated) project initiated in Barcelona and closely linked to degrowth efforts, has delved into resource conflicts caused by imperial technologies worldwide. In terms of time, the future is exploited to the benefit of those living now and mainly in the Global North, to the detriment of future generations. When it comes to 'benefit', however, it is highly questionable, whether all those industrial products really are a boon to their users at the end of the day. As Ivan Illich (1973) proposed in *Tools for Conviviality* there is a 'counter-productivity threshold', meaning that after having used a certain amount of, say, cars, antibiotics, or technical communication devices, their beneficial effects will be reversed, as we end up with traffic jams, bacteria resistance to antibiotics, or communicative processes requiring 50 emails instead of one paper letter to clarify a certain task.

History of technology critique

The idea that we need to define a desirable technology not aimed at economic growth is not new. It was a central issue to the first wave of growth critiques in the 1970s and early 1980s, before the advent of current degrowth debates from the 2010s onwards. Such issues have arisen since the first industrial revolutions (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). While forerunners of degrowth debates such as Jacques Ellul (1954), Günther Anders (1956), Herbert Marcuse (1964) or Lewis Mumford (1967) opposed technocratic societies and the alienation of human beings caused by the technocratic 'megamachine' (Mumford 1967), ideas springing up in the wake of the influential *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) went a step further, moving from analysis to constructing new technologies. They aimed at realisable concepts, being partly embedded in the emerging counter-culture that wanted to immediately try out 'alternative' ideas in communes, citizens initiatives or ecological farms (Boyle and Harper 1976).

Dimensions of convivial technology

'Convivial technology', based on Ivan Illich's concept of 'tools for conviviality', is one attempt to reconceptualise technology in the light of the degrowth debate. While sustainability discourses in the broader sense primarily emphasise the ecological impact of technologies, the concept of convivial technology focuses on the social and cultural effects of technological development and technical devices, not only while in use but also in manufacturing and disposal processes. Examples of spaces that encourage the development of convivial technology today include tool-lending libraries, repair cafés, do-it-yourself and/or do-it-together spaces and some ecologically and non-commercially oriented hacker spaces, maker spaces or fab labs (Treu et al. 2020; Robra et al. Chapter 32, this volume). As their production is often based on commoning processes, convivial tools are explicitly linked to commoning.

The concept of convivial technology outlines five central dimensions for technology developed from a degrowth perspective – 'connectedness', 'accessibility', 'adaptability', 'bio-interaction' and 'appropriateness' (Vetter 2018, 2023). These dimensions stem, first, from empirical research with not-for-profit groups developing and producing technologies aimed at conviviality, such as open-source hardware farming machines or cargo bikes, small wind turbines made from reused materials, or self-built composting toilets. Second, they were inspired by principles and criteria developed within degrowth debates at conferences or in articles or predecessor concepts, such as 'permaculture design principles' (Holmgren 2002), the 'criteria of radical technology' (Boyle and Harper 1976) and 'the seven commandments of low tech' (Bihouix 2015). As mentioned in the introduction, many different authors within degrowth debates developed such dimensions further – such as Genovese and Pansera (2021) and Kostakis (2023) – or applied them to different contexts, for instance Meyers (2024). However, there are very valuable parallel ideas on developing relevant criteria such as the main principles of 'low tech' as in Brockmann and Liegey (2021).

Connectedness

The dimension of connectedness raises multiple questions. In what ways does a technology shape the relationships between humans and non-humans in terms of its production, its use, and its infrastructure? How are relationships shaped between people working in a mine, a factory, or a recycling facility? What hierarchies exist between them? The majority of the technical equipment used today, for example, contains metallic ('rare earth') elements that are predominantly

mined under exploitative conditions in the Global South, and these metals are used in very small quantities and glued together with other materials which makes it hard, or even impossible, to recycle or reuse them. The challenge from a degrowth perspective is, therefore, to develop and promote technologies that are produced under fair conditions by means of infrastructures which do not destroy local communities, and that are organised on decentralised and equal bases. The dimension of connectedness exceeds the human sphere, to take account of connections forged between humans, human extensions and non-humans, for instance between a person and her artificial leg, or her microbiome. The central question, then, is: How are the various connections and relationships formed between all the human and all non-human members of a given collective?

Accessibility

The core questions of accessibility follow. Where, by whom and under what circumstances can a given technology be (further) developed, built and used? Who has the skills and the time to do so? Where did they get their knowledge from? Are blueprints or codes freely accessible or strictly protected? In cases of unrestricted access, who feels entitled to access, to learn and to use a given technology? From a degrowth perspective, this could mean, for instance, promoting the technological literacy of women and queers, releasing publicly funded technology only under open-source licenses, and refraining from preventing technological development through profit-driven patents.

Adaptability

To what extent may a technology be used independently? How easily may it be extended, amended, and coupled with other technologies? And, how can this be facilitated by modularising designs and standardising basic components? At first sight, independent use and connectivity could be taken as competing categories but, at a second glance, they might be seen to complement each other. This becomes most explicit when turning to organic life. All life on earth is based on carbon compounds, an ultra-standardised model allowing for an incredible plurality of forms and functions. A crucial question concerning technologies is then, to standardise at which level? A one-solution-fits-all product is problematic, especially if patented, as this can turn into a 'radical monopoly' (Illich 1973). From a degrowth perspective, adaptability encourages open and international standardisation of basic components, longer warranty periods and guaranteed reparability, as well as control over one's own data in digital space, since internet users could then safeguard information they share across different platforms.

Bio-interactivity

The dimension of bio-activity focuses on interactions within the living world. What effects does a technology have on living organisms – be they humans, animals or plants – and on ecosystems, such as soils, waters or the biosphere as a whole? Degrowth thinkers call for considering technologies over their entire life cycles, from resource procurement to disposal. And, they call for the precautionary principle to be applied when assessing health and environmental risks of new technologies – emphasising caution, pausing and reviewing before launching into new innovations that may have (unintended) far-reaching and irreversible consequences. Generally, it is important to

notice that all technical activities do have impacts on other living beings – which leads us directly to the fifth dimension of appropriateness.

Appropriateness

The dimension of appropriateness sums up the previous four. It is concerned with assessing whether a certain technology is appropriate for the task to be performed by considering all the other four dimensions. Additionally, from a degrowth perspective, it is clear that technologies should maintain a reasonable relationship between input in terms of time and material resources and the desired outcome considering, in particular, the plethora of existing technological devices. Can an old-tech serve the purpose just as well as an invention yet-to-be-built? Could there be a social solution to a problem that means we do not need a techno-fix at all?

Exemplar: composting toilet

An exemplar for a technology aimed at conviviality is the composting toilet (Vetter 2023, pp. 209–73), which has become increasingly popular in the past two decades. Often, they operate outdoors, and the core principle is to separate urine and faeces, so that a dry composting process for the faeces can be pursued, and water is not contaminated (which in the case of an interior water closet would have to be cleaned by complex sewage and chemical system processes). Composting toilets exist as stand-alone models in private gardens, as mass toilet stands at open-air festivals, and even in the interior of houses. How do the dimensions of convivial technology apply to composting toilets?

First of all, in the case of composting toilets, 'connectedness' goes far beyond the human sphere. Many builders and users of self-constructed composting toilet systems or kitchen-waste *bokashi* express desires to be connected with an ecological composting cycle, being able to directly experience this connectedness on their grounds, in their own garden. Using composting toilets where remnants remain visible in the toilet challenges people to think about their bodily routines and incorporate their feelings of shame and disgust. It allows people to pluriversalise (Kothari et al. 2019) their imaginaries re-valuing their bodily wastes, which now can serve as fertilisers. Often this makes visible the discrepancies between theory and practice. Even people who intellectually value the idea of a composting toilet can at first feel uncomfortable or even literally be unable to use them. This simple example illustrates that pluriversalising one's imaginary has to go together with pluriversalising one's body. Pluriversalising is not a mere intellectual act but a bodily transformation.

Let us now turn to 'accessibility'. The composting toilet is a simple, easily understood, technology. While its use requires complex knowledge, the materials required to make one are easy to find and accessible almost anywhere (global concept). A composting toilet may have an intermediary function enabling its users to directly experience an alternative 'possible' technology. Making 'the other' accessible is understood, in terms of the work of Ivan Illich (1973), as breaking a 'radical monopoly' – here, the monopoly of the water toilet and centralised waste disposal. By offering a different way of dealing with one's bodily excretions, the water toilet will be removed from the realm of unquestioned monopoly and incorporated into the realm of societal contingency, where it becomes one discussable option among others.

'Adaptability' means possibility for autonomy as well as connectivity. The freedom to decide whether to use a technological device, or not, is one of Illich's central arguments. Just as a degrowth

main principle is to ask (of anything) – do I really need it? If you can't be part of a given society without using a certain technology, Illich (1973) speaks of the existence of a 'radical monopoly'. Independence from state-owned infrastructures is an important motive for building decentralised infrastructures, such as composting toilets, as Pickering (2010) shows for counterculture adepts in Hawai'i. However, adaptability is not only about independence but also about connectivity, and about being able to decide whether one wants to be independent or connected. There is a question of scale reflected in the permaculture principle to 'use small and slow solutions', explained as '[s]ystems should be designed to perform functions at the smallest scale that is practical and energy-efficient for that function' (Holmgren 2002, p. 181). In the case of the composting toilet, the smallest possible scale can be rather large, as in hundreds used for the 70,000 guests at the annual five-day Fusion Festival in Germany. Here, composting large amounts of stuff accumulating in a short amount of time requires a different scale than the 'usual' one composting toilet used all year round by a more or less constant number of family members. Orders of magnitude and context matter.

As for 'bio-interactivity', the composting toilet is directly aimed at creating fertile soil. Whereas eco-innovation and related concepts usually state that they want to produce a technology that is less harmful to the environment, the ideal of convivial technologies is that of being *useful* in an ecological cycle. Wastewater plants in industrialised countries where water is plentiful may manage quite well to minimise harms that toxic wastewater potentially cause to water- and ecosystems (even if relying on extractivist and industrial energetic processes). But the composting toilet, in contrast, is aimed at creating ecological benefits and is especially useful in water-scarce Australia where permaculture originated. This claim is made explicit in permaculture's first core value 'care for the earth', explicated as 'husband soil, forests and water' (Holmgren 2013, p. 7). 'Caring' in this sense means contributing beneficially to ecosystems, not only in terms of 'producing no waste' but also in 'obtaining a yield' (Holmgren 2002). A composting toilet is a multi-species collective of human beings actively engaging with other living organisms, such as micro-organisms and worms, to turn shit into soil, which is then fed back into the planetary household.

So what about 'appropriateness'? Most water-based toilet systems pollute large amounts of fresh water which, then, must be treated in wastewater plants at great economic and ecological expense. This is not necessary with composting toilets. A salient feature of the ethics of convivial technology is that the most economical solution is not figured as end-of-the-pipe efficiency but rather as *sufficiency at work at all stages* of a technology's designs and operations.

Convivial sociality – commoning in practice

Every commodity in a market-based society is basically the same inasmuch as it may be reduced to its monetary value. In contrast, every commons is unique: it cannot be reduced to a universal currency but instead is place-centred and context-bound, serving the respective needs of human and more-than-human beings, those alive and those yet to be born. Nonetheless, there are patterns to be found across a great variety of commons that may be articulated and reused in order to reflect upon or amend one's own commoning practice. Originally formulated in both English and German, the 'patterns of commoning' by Bollier and Helfrich (2015) have been translated into numerous languages and are constantly being refined, added to and put to the test by commoners around the world, which is a commoning process in itself. In Germany, the patterns have also been adapted into a set of cards. The patterns are highly practical and are being applied in

numerous fields and areas, including organisational development, schools, community work, politics, community-supported agriculture and so on. This pattern language in the making comprises to date 33 patterns, including 'transparency in a sphere of trust', 'diversity in shared purpose' and 'use convivial tools'. We will now illustrate four of these patterns, using examples of actual commoning projects.

Ritualise togetherness

The 'ritualise togetherness' pattern is about regularly meeting and doing things together, for instance, organisational work in team meetings or celebrating festive occasions (Bollier and Helfrich 2015, p. 104ff). One example is the Halloween celebration in the rural social-cultural centre Haus des Wandels 'House of Change' (HDW undated) in Eastern Germany. In 2018, when a community of artists, researchers and activists arrived to reinvigorate this former agricultural boarding school, the village kids already had their Halloween tradition. What started as private fun of performing as if in a haunted house for dressed-up kids, ringing the bell turned into a big artistic happening in 2022. Since then the community starts preparations weeks before, setting a theme, redecorating the house, and inviting hundreds of people to their absurd spectacle of criticising patriarchy and capitalism in a playful manner for a very diverse audience. The event is not only an artistic and political happening, as well as a welcome spectacle for the village folks, but also a marker in the community's wheel of the year, which many experience as a cathartic moment of translating into play and performance the big and small atrocities people have suffered throughout the year.

Create semi-permeable membranes

'Commons need protection', write Bollier and Helfrich (2019, p. 130), while 'remaining open to the flows of energy and life that create value in a commons and sustain it'. They address this paradoxical situation that all commoners are confronted with by suggesting, creating a 'semi-permeable membranes' pattern of commoning instead of 'boundaries'. Similar to the blood-cerebral barrier in living beings, such membranes selectively allow what may and may not enter an organism or a commons, for that matter.

In the Romanian region of Transylvania, this pattern is reflected in an old commoning ritual, described in Mallien et al. (2017, p. 258). During the Easter holidays, the local youngsters symbolically take charge of the village affairs. One of their tasks is to walk along the village periphery, inspecting its bounds and cleaning its streams, locks and wells from breakage caused by winter storms. They are advised to neither add nor yield an inch of the village bounds. Yet these edges are not hermetic boundaries and in many instances are not even visible at first sight; instead, they are maintained and sustained by vigorous tradition that is enacted and renewed every spring.

A very similar tradition is kept alive in the Notre-Dame-Des-Lands (Western France) commoning project, a *zone à défendre* (ZAD, 'zone to defend') where groups of artists, activists, practitioners and scholars have squatted, and thus protected 4000 acres of wetlands from destruction through being turned into an international airport. As recounted by Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan (2021), every spring the community performs the ancient rite 'beating the bounds'. A band of people equipped with sticks and branches walk along the territory, marking its edges 'not just to beat away undesirable spirits [or government officials] but also to create an embodied map of the community's limits' (Fremeaux and Jordan 2021, p. 112).

Relationalised property

The 'relationised property' pattern is about '"other ways of having" that are aligned with commoning and go beyond the exclusion, extraction, and marketisation associated with conventional property ownership' (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 88).

In 1997, an intentional community moved to the near-derelict village Klein Jasedow in north-eastern Germany (Mallien et al. 2017, pp. 42–49). Thanks to gifts, public funding, and bank loans it could buy and renovate several houses, get hold of some land for building and farming, create jobs for the locals, set up a community-run school and contribute in various ways to reinvigorating the region. While the community's self-conception always was that of a commons, its premises were legally owned by a company founded by some community members. What would happen, say, if the owners died, and their heirs were not interested in continuing the project? And, what about the children of those community members who were not among the legal owners? When one of the community members gained an inheritance, the foundation Stiftung Zukunftswerk (SZ undated) was set up, now holding all the community's properties. One defining criterion of a commons is that it owns itself. Interestingly enough, the very same holds true for a 'foundation' under German law. This means that this place can now remain a home for its inhabitants – contemporary or future, human or more-than-human – for a long time to come.

Emerging from housing struggles in Berlin in the 1980s, Projektwerkstatt auf Gegenseitigkeit ('Project Workshop on Mutuality') (PAG undated) owns – in cooperation with a foundation – several houses and a farm in various villages and towns in the German federal state of Brandenburg. For over 20 years the people running these places have assembled and organised themselves to create within a solidarity collective, anti-capitalist forms of living that 'deprivatise ownership'. Each group using and inhabiting one of these places formulates for itself – in accordance with the statutes of PAG – a specific set of values, called 'failure criteria', to which this given group must adhere. If a group comes to the conclusion that they did fail by their own preformulated standards, they will self-dissolve and hand over houses, lands and premises, so that the next collective may try to live there according to their standards.

Share the risks of provisioning

A central feature of all community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives is that both harvest and risks are shared. This approach is contrary to the logic of the market where the farmers alone have a problem in cases of droughts, floods or other unfortunate events (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 173ff). The Lawine CSA in eastern Germany is a collective of female farmers (Lawine undated). They share their yields with about 70 households in their region. Every household obtains their share of vegetables and, eventually, cheese weekly, or in some winter months bi-weekly. Once a year, there is a digital bidding round. Every household bids up to three sums. At first every household states a monthly sum it could easily afford. The farmers' collective then check, if the accumulated bids would cover all of next year's costs. If so, the bid is taken. If not, they take the bids from the second round, and, if needed, from the third. Thanks to this procedure households can contribute according to their financial means while equally sharing the risk of crop failure among all members.

Commoning and degrowth as prefigurative politics

As commons researcher Silvia Federici (2012, p. 145) reminds us, 'No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life, our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see

ourselves as separate from them'. When taken seriously, commoning necessitates overcoming exploitation and externalisation (Habermann 2023). This, in turn, requires embracing the fact that all beings, human or otherwise, are part of an entangled web of life. Several commons thinkers (de Angelis 2017, p. 12; Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 189ff; Weber 2015, p. 371ff; Stavrides 2022) hence named conviviality, symbiosis and autopoiesis as central values of commoning. When it comes to the social movement of convivialism, however, there is a salient difference to commoning. The former seeks to bring about in a top-down manner a 'convivialist New Deal' (Les Convivialistes 2014, p. 14). Commoning, on the other hand, is concerned with self-organisation and bottom-up strategies of building 'now-topias', creating here-and-now free zones and spaces in the cracks and niches of patriarchal capitalist societies where it is possible to prefigure a good life for human and non-human nature alike (Nelson 2024) and to experiment with convivial technologies (Bobulescu and Fritscheova 2021). This, however, requires that we cultivate our capacity to imagine what a good life for all would look like (Köves, Chapter 25, this volume). We are, thus, entering the realm of storytelling, an essential tool of prefigurative praxis.

One masterful example of such storytelling is the novel *Always Coming Home* by Ursula Le Guin – first published in 1985, it sketched out a fully integrated post-collapse world of frugal abundance (Plomteux 2024, Chapter 17, this volume) long before the political slogan degrowth was coined. In her epically experimental book of speculative fiction, Le Guin (2019 [1985], pp. 472–3) gifted us with a poem, 'From the People of the Houses of Earth in the Valley to the Other People Who Were on Earth Before Them', which we urge you to seek out and read. In it our descendants speak from the far future, calling upon us so that we, here and now, may prepare the soil on which the generations to come might be able to live – as if in 'individual freedom realised in personal interdependence' (Illich 1973, p. 11), that is to say, in conviviality and commoning.

Note

1 Parts of this section of the chapter draw on Vetter (2018) and Schmelzer et al. (2022).

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15

AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM IN INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

Clive L. Spash

Introduction

The necessity of transforming dominant economic systems has arisen out of long-standing recognition of the connection between social-ecological crises and growth economies (Spash 2021a). Related activism engages with how to articulate the concerns of the oppressed, make silent voices heard and represent the powerless within political structures and institutions of governance that have been built on their disempowerment. Effective activism requires understanding the structure and causal mechanisms that maintain and reproduce current socially and ecologically harmful practices and prevent alternatives from being actualised. This involves both the biophysical and social structure that determines how economies operate as social-ecological provisioning systems (Spash 2024).

Processes of social provisioning, from the household (whether individual or collective) to national economy, require ongoing inputs of energy and materials which go back into the environment in equal mass. Theoretical grounding here has been provided by ecological economists and social ecologists who have related the material and energy flows to reproduction of economic processes captured under the term 'social metabolism' (such as Krausmann 2017). Capital-accumulating growth economies maintain their high social metabolism by continually seeking resources and waste sinks, activities which are associated with extractivism, land-grabbing and cost shifting. The process is more than a material or technical relationship and involves power relationships structured through institutional arrangements of business and international trade.

These relationships are exploitative of both humans and non-humans and replace natural self-sustaining systems with artificial processes. This raises the need to conceptualise the difference between a human being as part of everything else versus human being and action as distinct from the non-human. What makes them distinct can be debated, but that humans are so is clear from their undertaking actions that no other species undertake and about which degrowth is directly concerned. Contra the likes of Latour's confused concept of hybrid-nature (Malm 2019; Pollini 2013), society cannot simply absorb the natural world as a social artefact. Soper (1995) elaborates at length on how Nature has been and can be meaningfully conceptualised. She presents three definitions: first, the philosophical approach to the importance of recognising otherness and the irreducibility of the other to the self; second, the basic structure of reality in which humans

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are subject to, not determinants of, fundamental processes and causal mechanisms; and, third, the common understanding that the more something (whether an entity, system or process) has autonomy from humans the more natural it appears (Soper 1995). I therefore use the term Nature, with a capital 'N', to represent this tripartite combination, and this distinct but not separate aspect of the reality of human existence.

The concern of degrowth activists and ecological economists, amongst others, is for the destruction of Nature and oppression of others under current economic systems. In particular, growth economies shape social and society–Nature relations beyond their own territories and reproduce themselves at the expense of others. Brand and Wissen (2021) refer to this as the imperial mode of living, which is built into the political and social structures of the industrially developed and emerging economies. They describe how this mode of living is unconsciously reproduced and embedded in everyday practices and 'common sense'. The relationships become hegemonic and adopted as common sense not simply by coercion but through shaping subjects and their world views and being reproduced through their own practices 'as people striving for particular forms of the good life' (Brand and Wissen 2021, p. 42). Unconscious reproduction via daily practices of consumption and production combines with purposeful structuring to maintain the system.

Growth economies create structures promoting private interest and dependency that reinforce the desirability of wanting ever more (whether money, goods and services, or happiness) in competition with others, while consumerism prioritises having over being. A good example is Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, which describes how an individual's social status is publicly displayed through material possessions (Veblen 1991 [1899]). However, this status is inherently limited and continuously undermined by the consumption of others (Hirsch 1977). A person's psychosocial biography is created through their consumption practices, which marketing and product innovation purposefully and continuously disrupt and deconstruct. Change impacts individuals, societies and cultures. Stability is continuously undermined by an instituted process of ongoing technocratic transformation that rushes blindly forward into the unknown. Individuals pursue their private interests, seeking certainty and avoidance of change, then give up on radically reimaging society and sacrifice their autonomy in favour of the security of following rules set down by others. The re-emergence of extreme right wing and fascist parties promising authoritarian rule can then be explained as voting to remove the uncertainties of democracy and change due to social-ecological crises. Yet, the institutional structure of modern society fails to provide the desired certainty and individuals sacrifice their autonomy for an illusory security that isolates and alienates them from others while empowering those seeking to completely destroy democracy.

The degrowth movement promotes radical transformation of social and political structures which involves theorising about strategies for systemic change (Barlow et al. 2022), and opposing those who are trying to maintain their power by recreating the system along orthodox lines (Brand 2016). Degrowth aims for democratic transformation to socially just and environmentally sustainable futures premised on reducing material and energy flows by downscaling the biophysical size of national and international economic activity (reducing production and consumption). Degrowth activism then becomes defined in terms of independence from and opposition to not only capitalist and other oppressive structures but also the social, psychological and ethical structures of consumerism and capital accumulation. The ability to stand back from and judge what is going on in society is necessary.

The concept of autonomy has then been central to the political philosophy of degrowth and its approaches to the roles of individual and collective action. For those living within the social-economic structure of capitalist market economies, this involves personal critical reflection on one's own practices and ways of being with an ongoing agenda of self-reform and

self-limitation. Individuals seeking transformative change are engaged in their own processes of personal development and deep transformations (Nesterova 2024). As Buch-Hansen et al. (2024) note, 'degrowth entails metamorphoses not only of social structures and relationships, but also of the inner being of individuals and the social relation to nature'. More than some liberal individualism, the approach aims to prevent alienation from the collective through democratic institutions based on the political philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997). The vision is of an egalitarian regime and institutions that socialise individuals into a democratic identity that emphasises self-limitation and empowers collective radical rethinking that challenges the existing imaginary (Olson 2006).

The degrowth movement promises better ways of being, often proposed as achieving a good/meaningful life with reference to a variety of concepts from different cultures (such as *eudaimonia* in Europe, *buen vivir* in South America and *ubuntu* in Africa). However, there is a tendency to leave unclear and implicit the grounds for taking morally good actions in relationship to others, both human and non-human, and how 'moral considerability' as ethicists term it, applies across various divides (such as species, time, space, gender, class, religion and culture). While the role of ethical judgment appears central to social-ecological transformation, a range of questions arise concerning the basis for claiming that degrowth futures will be better than the alternatives, including whether pluralist, subjectivist and/or individual autonomy comes into conflict with an objective ethics of 'the good life'. Broad-based consent is seen as constituting a key prerequisite for a possible degrowth transformation (Buch-Hansen 2018), but this leads to the possibility of conformity to, rather than overthrowing of, hegemonic ideas and instituted imaginaries. What then are the grounds for intervention against the interests of others, whether the rich and powerful or simply those invested in the imperial mode of living? In particular, an apparent conflict arises between degrowth and the common sense idea of freedom as individual choice which is embedded in modern market capitalist institutions.

Windegger and Spash (2023) have argued for the need to explicitly address and contest the meaning being given to freedom under capital-accumulating market economies in order to progress social-ecological transformation and counter-hegemonic subjectivities. This chapter builds from and incorporates aspects of that work. In the next section, the hegemonic position on freedom as individualised is critically explained. A counter-hegemonic conceptualisation of freedom, and its relationship to autonomy as both individual and collective, is then presented based on the work of Castoriadis. In reconceptualising freedom, the aim is to draw out the implications for both individual practice and solidary group action. Degrowth is then explained to be facing the challenge of breaking away from hegemonic freedom, while counter-hegemonic freedom as autonomy and self-limitation is argued to conflict with its appeals to 'the good life' and *buen vivir*. Concerns are raised over the implicit ethics of degrowth, the treatment of Nature and an underlying modernist assumption that humans independently produce themselves. In the final section, questions are raised as to the implications for putting degrowth ideas into practice and, in particular, to requirements for degrowth democracy, its limitations and their implications for protecting human rights and recognising limits beyond human control. The foundations for establishing the values and principles of future degrowth societies are argued to be more extensive than typically recognised or discussed.

Hegemonic freedom: individual choice and autonomy

Under the hegemonic neoliberal ideology of freedom, if you remove people's choices in the marketplace this is equated to removing their freedom. This approach defines freedom in terms of

individuals being free from coercion when making contracts and consumer choices. Freedom is defined in negative terms, that is by what it is not, or more precisely, freedom is not being coerced into a choice or contract. This follows the liberal political tradition which emphasises the volitional power of the individual as agent set within benevolent and just legal institutions. Contractarian theories, such as that of John Rawls (1972), going back to the classic liberalism of Thomas Hobbes (1651 [1994]), assume that individuals freely relinquish liberty for security within a legally constituted social order, the social contract. Under neoliberalism, social-economic market structures are assumed to provide individuals with the greatest freedom possible. Neoliberal freedom considers emancipation primarily in terms of liberating individuals from State intervention and interference in personal choice by other individuals.

A central ideologue of the neoliberal project was Friedrich von Hayek (1899–1992), associated with the Austrian school of economics, who argued that individual certainty about (private) control of material objects is necessary to carry out a coherent plan of action (Hayek 2011 [1960], p. 207). Neoliberals combine such private property rights with the necessity for competition between buyers and sellers, which is meant to curb coercive power during market interactions and produce spontaneous order (Friedman 2002 [1962], p. 14ff; Gamble 1996, 27ff; Hayek 1948, p. 21, 2011 [1960], p. 88). Interference with market mechanisms is regarded as reducing individual liberty and social prosperity, so that any such political or collective action is condemned. Indeed, market failure is typically attributed to interventions into the market by non-market social forces. Thus, neoliberals regard trade unions and government as a menace to liberty, while they legitimise corporate and entrepreneurial power as 'natural'.

A social neo-Darwinian naturalisation is also applied to the idea that competition justifies gross inequity. Resources are to be allocated exclusively via the competitive marketplace where those who compete best gain the highest rewards. Hegemonic political rhetoric consists of mythologising meritocracy, such as, the poor are lazy, working hard brings rewards, wealth accrues to the excellent, and the wealthy are successful businessmen. Any attempt to rectify inequitable material distribution – mechanisms determining actual opportunities – is rejected as an infringement on individual liberty, and the only equality allowed is that before the law (Friedman 2002 [1962], p. 161ff; Hayek 2011 [1960], pp. 96, 104).

Yet, despite the political rhetoric, the idealised neoliberal society requires a strong State heavily involved in the lives of its citizens in order to guarantee the operation of market institutions (such as the price system, property rights and contract law) against any opposition. Indeed, under neoliberalism, the State exists as an enforcer of market ideology by legislating a social order entirely based on market-like institutions and promoting the competitive spirit. It also supports business and corporations through the annihilation of space via undertaking infrastructure development not least in transportation (such as seaports, railways, roads and airports). Increasingly evident is the securitisation of civil society against social and environmental movements opposing growth. This follows a long tradition of using military power to secure the economic process and resources for 'development'. Militarised 'defence' of international supply chains, colonialism and imperial expansion go hand-in-hand with capital accumulating growth economies. Gross domestic product (GDP), as a financial measure of economic throughput, is highly correlated with government military expenditure (Spash 2021b). These points illustrate how supposed freedom for one group is obtained by oppression and coercion of another.

Liberal theories provide inadequate explanations for the operation of society and prove to be self-contradictory. A focus on individual responsibility neglects the emergent social and economic structures that restrict personal freedom (Artiga 2012), while use of political power extends beyond direct force or coercion to more subtle forms of co-optation and acquiescence (Stör 2017).

Windegger and Spash (2023) identify the role of structural power constraints (such as social and economic pressures) operating without any overt coercion but as a significant factor influencing the extent to which people feel free/unfree. This view contradicts Hayek's narrow negative definition of freedom. It involves a much broader understanding that includes structures, societal arrangements and the specific social context of an individual within a political-economic system.

The political economy of capital accumulating systems is absent from orthodox mainstream economics but evident in Marxist and other heterodox economic schools of thought (Spash 2024, Chapter 2). Marxist theory identifies capitalism as a social structure that forms material and social conditions (in terms of power, class relations and property rights) backed by legal institutions acting on behalf of capitalists. Structure and technology go hand-in-hand to create lock-in and are purposefully used by capitalists to do so. The COVID-19 crisis provides a good example where hi-tech corporations exploited the opportunity to promote surveillance, homeschooling, telehealth, smart cities, exclusively electronic money commerce (removing physical currency), driverless vehicles and 5G super connectivity (Klein 2020). Feminist economics has associated capitalism with patriarchy and its dependency on exploiting unpaid female labour. Social-ecological economics identifies the central role of cost-shifting in the competitive structure of market economies and how this is manifest in the deliberate creation of social and ecological harm of others (Spash and Fuselier 2023). Indeed, the establishment of market capitalist relations of production and normalisation of profiteering require supporting social institutions without which any material transformation of social provisioning systems is impossible.

While much emphasis has been placed by Marxists on materialism and technology, this can be seen as influenced by a Soviet-era reinterpretation of Marx that supported industrialisation as a priori and foundational while downgrading social relations (Meiksins Wood 2003). The historical transition to capitalism was undertaken in an agricultural, not industrial, era and involved changes in a whole range of traditional social provisioning practices and customs (Thompson 1993). The transformation to market capitalism required the imposition of new laws and legal restrictions (Hill 1997), which removed the ability to reproduce the household outside of market institutions. The capitalist mode of production and the ensuing dependence on technology, expert knowledge and industrialisation have restricted the ability to achieve freedom, even within the narrow confines of its negative liberal definition as absence of directly forced coercion.

Today, the reproduction of market capitalism as a social process of power relations is rather self-evident. Ever-changing technologies disempower existing social provisioning systems to create new opportunities for capital accumulation. The imposition of innovative products, justified as creating convenience, is achieved via undermining the ability to perform established practices and removing options for former ways of living. Social structures are created that restrict the means of meeting needs, and aim to control housing, communication, travel and work. High-tech, government-backed and corporate-controlled changes are enforced by new institutions, for example, securitised banking, online trading, QR codes and electronic money. New products are made essential – computer, mobile phone, smart phone – as the latest versions make their predecessors obsolete by design. Inability to adapt and non-conformity result in marginalisation and ostracisation. The (neo)liberal lie is embedded in its concept of freedom.

Counter-hegemonic freedom: individual and collective autonomy

Windegger and Spash (2023) explore an alternative approach to the hegemonic position on freedom by reference to the theoretical ideas of Castoriadis, whose writing has inspired and been heavily referenced by degrowth-related authors (Asara et al. 2013; D'Alisa et al. 2014; Deriu

2014; Kallis 2011, 2019; Latouche 2009, 2014; Muraca 2013; Tsagkari et al., Chapter 10, this volume). In contrast to the methodological individualism of hegemonic freedom, Castoriadis (1997 [1983], p. 308) defines autonomy as conscious self-legislation undertaken by both individuals and collectives.

At the individual level, being autonomous implies that the institutions guiding a person's actions and thought are volitionally adopted rather than being externally imposed. However, thought and action do not start from liberal political philosophers' social-psychological void, such as Locke's blank slate or Rawls' veil of ignorance. Individuals are subject to the influence of their unconscious psyche and historical, cultural and social context. Indeed, absolute autonomy, total independence from such causal mechanisms, is neither desirable nor required for an individual to be free. Instead, what autonomy implies is a particular mode of being, in which a person rejects becoming a passive product of their psychosocial biography in favour of being an active co-author of their own life (Castoriadis 1991, p. 165). This presupposes the ability to evaluate the validity and desirability of one's own behaviours, routines, beliefs and desires through practices of introspection, critical reflection and deliberation (Kalyvas 1998, p. 170; Kioupkiolis 2012, p. 150). An autonomous individual recognises and engages with their psychosocial biography and context, while accepting that full control is unattainable.

Autonomy at the collective level recognises that the embeddedness of individuals in social relations involves intersubjectivity (Castoriadis 1991, p. 164). Humans are not isolated persons existing *in* society but rather social beings and persons *of* society. An individual can neither be free on their own nor under all forms of social structure. Social autonomy requires the possibility for all individuals taking part in processes of negotiation and desire formation whereby society is institutionalised and social meanings created. Castoriadis (1991, p. 41) refers to this as a process of 'social imaginary significations'. Politics is understood as encompassing all the activities and processes in which the members of a society discuss, interpret and (re)define the norms, rules/regulations, objectives and limits of their social institutions. Institutions are structures open to interrogation, criticism and deliberate alteration (Castoriadis 1997 [1983], p. 310). A society is self-governing when its constitutive collective consciously creates and enacts the institutions governing the lives of its members. Individuals must be able to endorse specific social institutions that reduce individual autonomy as their own, as self-imposed constructs decided upon through democratic processes. Castoriadis (1991, p. 168) refers to democracy as 'the effective possibility of equal participation of all in instituting activities as well as in explicit power' and this entails a 'reciprocal implication of equality and freedom'.

An autonomous society presupposes a wide-scale democratisation of social relations set within an institutional framework that enables and encourages participation by all in collective deliberation and decision-making. Economies, as social provision systems, would be characterised by a variety of different modes of production and organisation. However, all such systems should provide a sufficient livelihood for every citizen, reduce disparities of wealth and power and increase individual autonomy, for example, through the unconditional autonomy allowance of Liegey and Nelson (2020). The aim is to enable equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and the creation of social institutions. Democracy is taken to include the protection of a private sphere for its members. Hence, autonomy as positive freedom presupposes a system of collectively agreed (negative) rights which allow diversity and protect individuals from infringements by others. As discussed later in the chapter, expecting the collective to respect human rights and the achievement of past democratic struggles is more of a hope than a guarantee. In summary, the vision of Castoriadis (1997 [1989], pp. 405–13) for a free, self-governing society is built upon actualising equal opportunities for self-awareness, critical and reflective thought, political

participation and self-realisation, in a democratic institutional context that creates an ethic of being mindful of others.

Challenges for degrowth

The counter-hegemonic political philosophy of freedom put forward by Castoriadis is, despite his claims, no less utopian than that of the hegemonic position, but just as that ideology takes the growth society in one direction so the counter-hegemonic position would take degrowth in another. However, while Castoriadis' influence on degrowth thought is substantive, the movement is subject to a multiplicity of diverse perspectives including on how freedom is conceptualised (Barca et al. 2019, p. 5). Such pluralism is typically considered a core strength of degrowth but also results in contradictory positions (Paulson 2017). Indeed, under the guise of pragmatic openness even hegemonic neoliberal and growth-based discourses may be reproduced.

Even when explicitly addressing capitalist economic growth structures, there are positions in the degrowth-related literature that appear sub-hegemonic. For example, Gorz (1989) explicitly relates autonomy to freedom from waged labour relations and capitalist productivism. He takes an approach that employs two dichotomies – autonomy versus necessity, and freedom versus heteronomy. Autonomous activities are those that are undertaken without necessity (the need to meet the conditions for subsistence), while freedom involves avoiding being directed by others. Gorz (1989, p. 167) exemplifies this with the act of making bread which can only be an autonomous activity if it is made 'as an optional product' and he notes that, by definition, the commodifying activities of a baker cannot qualify no matter how creative the baker and artistic the bread; curiously termed technical autonomy (Gorz 1989, p. 171 – footnote 31). The baker can only be autonomous and free in the absence of necessity or direction. Similarly, Illich (1975 [1973]) associates autonomy with freedom from certain types of technology, infrastructure and bureaucracies. The immediate point is that freedom is defined negatively here, as being free from something that appears restrictive, and excludes a range of creative acts by a transformative-being who might still be operating within social and biophysical structures beyond their control or choice.

Schoppek (2020) argues that degrowth contains elements that are counter-hegemonic, but also those that are sub-hegemonic. She illustrates the point with two degrowth positions identified in the empirical work of Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018) related to understanding diversity in the degrowth movement. The counter-hegemonic position is that of a politically informed progressive left, supporting an anarchistic continual struggle for freedom, described as supplying a structural critique. The sub-hegemonic position is regarded as involving a moral perspective falling under the heading of self-sufficiency discourses which are argued to be compatible with neoliberal thought. Indeed, conceptualising freedom only in terms of individual opportunities and self-responsibility is consistent with hegemonic imaginaries because it lacks the institutional context and social structure within which the struggle for collective emancipation and deliberate social transformation is taking place. Self-limitation may also correspond with neoliberal ideals of individuals achieving self-realisation through their purchases in the marketplace and refusing to buy one product in preference for another, as in green consumerism.

More generally, such appeals to individual self-limitation parallel traditional liberal ideology, where rational man achieves self-realisation and freedom through liberation from domination by others (whether other humans or Nature). In this respect, degrowth would then appear little different from pro-growth sustainable development, where the fundamental modernist assumption remains that human beings produce themselves independently of Nature, 'the other', over which they maintain mastery and control (Lumsden 2021). As Olson (2006, p. 287) remarks, 'The

bureaucratic-capitalist imaginary posits the possibility of the total rational mastery of both the natural and the social worlds'.

Contradictory positions in the degrowth movement are then evident concerning the relationship between Nature and society. In the definitional degrowth vocabulary, Gudynas (2014, p. 202) states that *buen vivir*:

> involves recognising intrinsic values in Nature, thus breaking with the prevailing Western anthropocentric position in which humans are the only subjects of value. Furthermore, *buen vivir* rejects the instrumentalisation of nature by humankind.

In the same volume, D'Alisa et al. (2014, p. 8, original emphases) state that:

> Rather than *limits to* growth, the literature on **autonomy** emphasizes collective *self-limitations* . . . not invoked for the good of nature or to avoid an impeding [sic] **disaster**, but because living simply . . . is how the good life is conceived.

The same position was earlier put forward by Schneider et al. (2010, p. 513), who regard limits as a 'social choice'. Nature here appears totally anthropocentric and possibly only of instrumental value ignoring basic biophysical reality, limits to human agency and the place of humans within natural structures that they neither create nor control.

Kallis (2019) and Kallis and March (2015) emphasise the ability of individuals and collectives to negotiate and set their own constraints while equating autonomy with a form of self-limitation, which is not meant to be an inevitable reaction to scarcity, impending catastrophes or other external imperatives. Kallis (2019, p. 121) explicitly argues 'for self-limitation as a prerequisite for freedom and the search for the good or meaningful life'. Self-limitation and choosing a frugal life of sufficiency might be taken to correspond to living the good life. However, the imperative for self-limitation then appears to be a moral one that is left implicit. Indeed, this is strikingly similar to defining autonomy as an agent acting in accord with objective morality rather than the influence of desires, an argument found in Kantian moral philosophy. Similarly, employing the terminology of a good or meaningful life appeals to an Aristotelian ethic that employs an objective value theory, which means that 'the good' is not socially constructed. If there is a philosophical good (as in the Aristotelian 'good life') then humans can partake of it, but what constitutes a good life is predetermined (necessitating specific things like friendship). Kallis, as quoted earlier, seemingly recognises that humans search for the good or meaningful life; they do not then subjectively create it. However, much is left implicit in such references to 'the good life', and there is a lack of explicit attention to ethics, value theory, what constitutes 'the good' or guides moral conduct.

There is an evident underlying tension in the degrowth movement between philosophical positions – objective versus subjective, realist versus constructionist. An ethical perspective of seeking 'the good' and respecting biophysical limits to avoid social-ecological crises appears to conflict with advocacy of individual autonomy as self-limitation in the absence of any constraints or moral absolutes. For example, consider how Asara et al. (2013, p. 233), criticise Serge Latouche for arguing in favour of an ethics of responsibility in their statement that:

> Philosophy cannot determine a substantive common good: the latter is a result of a social and collective action, i.e. principally politics. This is not a relativist position, as there is one important component of substantive, non-relative and democratic common good, which is the conception of autonomy as both an end and a guide. Politics is then the regime that tries

to realise contemporaneously individual and collective autonomy and the common good as conceived by the collectivity.

The authors here are defining autonomy as an ultimate end and an objective guiding value. Contrary to their opening statement they actually appeal to the philosophy of Castoriadis to justify their position on autonomy. So, contradicting themselves, they employ philosophy to determine a substantive common good, namely autonomy, which they deny is possible to do. In addition, there is implicit in the approach an anthropocentrism that entails the only moral entity for which there is a good is the human being (as an objectively intrinsically valuable entity). There then appear here at least two substantive, non-relative, philosophical claims as to what constitutes the common good, and there appears no reason why philosophy should be jettisoned in favour of politics – in fact, philosophy appears necessary to underpin and improve the logic and consistency of the arguments being made by degrowth advocates.

Activating transformation in practice

A contested area in degrowth arises when considering external limits that are non-negotiable and outside of human control, whether biophysical structures and their mechanisms or an objective morality. The first has been core to the environmental movement and ecological economics, and has formed the basis of scientific challenges to the benefits of a growth economy and also growth-committed economic schools of thought. Limitation due to the basic physical, chemical and biological constitution of reality is not determined by humans let alone self-determined by individuals. As human biological entities we eat food, drink water and breath air of certain qualities, and must remove waste heat and excrete or we die. The concept of social metabolism draws a direct parallel with human metabolism in order to understand the necessary conditions for maintaining and reproducing society. Pollution in terms of returning waste to the environment is inevitable, but the quantity and quality are not. Degrowth literature has lacked clarity on Nature–society relations, with mixtures of post-modernist deconstruction of Nature conflicting with realist limits to growth (Spash 2021c). The second area, ethical limits, has implications for counter-hegemonic movements but raises concerns over appeals made to concepts such as a 'good life for all' and *buen vivir* and the moral considerability of non-humans. Such inclusion of non-humans and respecting natural ecosystems as living collectives appears far from synonymous with the anthropocentrism and instrumentalism of much degrowth literature. In both cases, there arise implications for the political philosophy of degrowth and related activism.

Political participation is constitutive for the conceptualisation of freedom under Castoriadis' notion of autonomy, which involves deliberate will-formation, self-awareness and reflexivity. Castoriadis utopian political philosophy directs action towards empowering individuals to become proactive, self-constituting citizens, where self-determination is regarded as inherently emancipatory (Adams 2012, p. 316). Such citizens would be involved in the creation of the structures and institutions which delimit their own range of action rather than being subject to predetermined market institutions. Degrowth identifies with an anti-consumerist dematerialisation that promotes independence from the imperial mode of living with its international trade, extractivism and exploitative dependencies. While autonomy is argued to create a self-defining, and hence unknown, future society, in fact there is a presupposition in degrowth that it will lead to a political economy constituted of social institutions that deliver good and meaningful lives for all. Degrowth entails the rejection of central aspects of neoliberal freedom, including hegemonic positions that regard redistribution as a threat to freedom, promote self-regulating markets as

superior to planning, emphasise negative freedom, justify inequality, universalise private property rights, and downgrade non-commercial political rights. Moreover, the degrowth literature proposes a set of policies, such as basic services and income provision (such as the unconditional autonomy allowance in Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. 133–4), as well as specific behaviours, such as self-sufficiency and voluntary simplicity (Alexander 2013; Kallis 2011; Paech 2012). Implicit in the approach are expectations of participatory democracy delivering a better and more ethical political economy including social justice, equality and conviviality. However, there appears to be no reason why such policies and behaviours should result from diverse social groups engagement in political debate and no assurance that there would be convergence on the expectations of degrowth activists as to what is good. Such convergence might result if there is an objective good, but if what constitutes 'the good' is just a social construct then it would appear totally relativist, contextual and indeterminate.

The problem is further complicated by the social conditioning of the general public. Freedom as market choice is deeply intertwined with identity, and this imaginary has been spread by neoliberalism and the capitalist, growth as development, model. This is the hegemonic imaginary of an imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2021, Chapter 27, this volume). Institutions are established that encourage and affirm consumerism, hedonistic materialism, love of money for itself, and measure social status by conspicuous consumption, material possessions and income. This impacts individuals' justifications for and continuation of practices (such as meat consumption, car use and flying) that they themselves may recognise as having negative social-ecological consequences. The impacts are often subconscious and affect even those calling for social-ecological transformation.

Consider a few examples both of a general kind found amongst environmentalists and within the context of degrowth. Eversberg (2021) conducted a cluster analysis on a 2016 data set with 2000 respondents to a German survey on environmental consciousness, which he uses to classify respondents into a variety of social groupings. He then reveals the contradictory positions held within these social groupings in their relations to Nature. A specific example is the active engagement in flying by the otherwise most eco-socially minded group in his study. Flying is part of the imperial mode of living, its expansion is at the forefront of the growth economy with planned investment of $5.3 trillion by 2036, its environmental impact on CO_2 alone ranks the sector seventh relative to emissions from nation-States, and it is an elitist luxury behaviour with less than 10 per cent of people having ever flown (SG 2020; Spash 2015, 2019).

Turning to the degrowth movement, two surveys of international degrowth conference participants reveal ecologically problematic and sub-hegemonic positions (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018; Windegger and Spash 2023). Again, this can be exemplified with responses on flying. Eversberg and Schmelzer (2018) found that 69 per cent of their sample supported long-haul flying for pleasure. Windegger and Spash (2023) reported that 29 per cent of their sample rated stopping flying for environmental reasons as seriously constraining on their personal freedom, which contrasted with the general support for freedom as self-limitation. Thus, even within the degrowth movement the consumerist imaginary can be found along with use of hegemonic freedom as a legitimation of practices recognised by their practitioners as socially and ecologically harmful.

The interaction of social structure and personal psychology brings into question what is expected from autonomy that would move society away from such embedded and normalised ecologically destructive and socially divisive practices. The creation of one's identity via product purchases in modern consumerist societies involves creation of social relations via in-group/out-group behaviour. Corporate marketing purposefully targets this mechanism in its advertising, product differentiation and pricing policies. Social structure and norms of behaviour are

institutionalised in expectations at work such as using a smartphone, car or flying. If group norms are violated, then social disapproval is likely to follow. Changing personal practices is not just challenging personally but confronts institutional barriers and challenges others' practices simply by exemplifying alternative ways of being. Challenging unsustainable practices occurs simply by non-conformity to those practices, and it inevitably challenges others engaged in those practices whether colleagues, family or friends. That individuals and their practices are embedded in societal structures and institutions means both must change together to achieve social-ecological transformation (Spash 2016).

Castoriadis' position requires an egalitarian economic regime and institutions that socialise individuals into democratic culture. His understanding of freedom presupposes practices of critical self-reflection, a re-evaluation of deeply ingrained values and principles, as well as a continuous politicisation of the debate. According to Castoriadis (1991, p. 165), a reflective and deliberative subjectivity paves the way for a third element of vital importance for individual autonomy, named 'radical imagination'. As part of an individual's psyche this relates to acts of 'positing, creating and bringing-into-being' (Gezerlis 2001, p. 482). The enormous creative capacity innate to human beings enables them to envision alternatives in the construction of their identities, practices and how they live their lives that exceed the range of already available forms. This is vital, since it helps in the formation of resistance against social powers, which, in Castoriadis' opinion, are manipulative, in as far as they predetermine what one perceives as conceivable and eligible options (Kioupkiolis 2012, p. 153).

The collective radical imaginary is expected to challenge the existing instituted-imaginary, prevent alienation from others and limit political claims that seek to completely destroy democracy (Olson 2006, p. 278). Democratic processes and discursive practices are meant to prevent the creation of destructive institutions and practices, but there are no guarantees. Freedom is built on a radical imaginary that entails uncertainty, no answers are permanent as the community creates and recreates its future.

Freedom cannot be achieved once and for all, nor is it established by a constitution, social contract or set of externally imposed rules. Democracy reduced to a set of procedures leads to only sporadic participation of the citizenry. Castoriadis rejects representative democracy because it results in elite decision-making behind closed doors. His vision of democracy is consistent and continuous criticism of the instituted-imaginary and the struggle against bureaucratic-capitalist institutions that threaten a society of total servility (Olson 2006). The autonomous individual is engaged in an ongoing, sustained, continuous struggle, or what Kioupkiolis (2012, p. 151) terms an 'agonistic process'. This is understood as critical questioning of both the internal and external mechanisms holding individuals captive in static patterns of imposed meanings and modes of conducted, which prevent imagining alternatives (Castoriadis 1991, p. 163, 1997, p. 264).

Despite these arguments, Castoriadis recognises the importance of individual rights and the failure of States to respect them. He regards their defence as something to be achieved by construction of institutions supporting a participatory democratic culture and identity, which is expected to reject the abuse of individual rights domestically and internationally. Yet, regardless of their importance there is no certainty that such values will be upheld. The only principle that appears constant, unquestionable and absolute is autonomy. In essence, autonomy is required for all else to work in his theory of democracy. So, it takes the form of a universal concept outside of the socialisation process and radical imaginary.

In fact, a lot more than autonomy seems necessary in practice, because activating psychosocial mechanisms for achieving freedom depends upon institutionalising democratic practices of self-engagement, emancipation and self-empowerment within community. Economic equality

would be necessary to avoid dependency on others, and from this can be drawn the requirement for social provisioning to meet minimum needs and maximum wealth. Constructing and actualising a strong democratic culture of participatory inclusive deliberation would require institutions such as neighbourhood meetings, local citizens assemblies, and procedures for establishing direct democracy and an informed citizenry. Activism might then direct itself to public engagement in local affairs, self-organisation of citizens and reclaiming public spaces and fora. (For such autonomy in practice, see Marina Sitrin, Chapter 4, this volume; David Barkin, Chapter 12, this volume.)

Conclusion

In consumerist societies autonomously making choices over what commodities and services to purchase and material goods to accumulate is equated with being free and defended as such by 'free market' ideology. This hegemonic freedom regards more choice as always better, leading to more product differentiation, no matter how superficial or manipulative, and more consumption as substitute for human well-being. The positive emphasis on materialism, hedonism, having and possessing, contrasts with the perspective of degrowth, where these are generally regarded as negatives and often associated with practices regarded as unethical, unjust and inequitable.

Counter-hegemonic freedom is grounded in material and social conditions and institutions for leading a meaningful and self-determined life. This positive notion of freedom requires actualising opportunities and their equal distribution, and recognising that humans live in social relations of interdependency as inherently social beings, not as isolated individuals. Freedom entails awareness of and engagement with external *and* internal constraints, while also emphasising the importance of reflective and creative acts of self-determination, in both the individual and collective dimensions. Castoriadis' political philosophy identifies freedom with a continuous effort and agonistic process where institutions (norms and societal rules) are open to collective scrutiny and reconsideration, political participation and self-determination, collective ownership and commoning, self-limitation as an act of freedom, underscoring the relevance of self-emancipation, openness and creativity. While this counter-hegemonic concept of freedom informs degrowth, there are also appeals being made to values which are based on a different logic than Castoriadis' political philosophy of autonomy. Degrowth has, for example, emphasised sufficiency over satiation, simplicity over complexity, convivial low-tech over convenient high-tech.

What the degrowth movement recognises, when advocating social-ecological transformation, is an unethical and unjust system that creates gross multiple forms of inequity, social-ecological destruction, alienation and crises. There are then strong value positions behind the movement that neither accept that everything should be 'up for grabs' nor that they can be left to a totally open participatory deliberative process. Degrowth supporters do not want a patriarchal society run by racists, fascists or nazis; they stand against colonialism, imperialism and armed conflict; and they oppose extractivism, land grabbing and social injustice. Castoriadis' political philosophy raises the need for democratic institutions that are adequate to the task of protecting individual rights but relies heavily on the single principle of autonomy. A problem confronting being open to radical imaginaries is the potential for bad outcomes.

While Castoriadis political philosophy has proven appealing for the degrowth community, those proposing social-ecological transformation within the degrowth movement appear to hold values and principles they would protect from the vagaries of an abstract political process of individual and collective autonomy. If so, the substantive challenges for degrowthers achieving social-ecological transformation go beyond establishing the basis on which strong democracy can be institutionalised and raise moral questions as to what constitutes the good in 'the good life'

and how it can be achieved. Degrowth as a scientifically informed environmental movement is also based on fundamental concerns about human dependency on Nature and structures that are beyond human capacity to change. This is contra the hubris of modernity, which is exactly why there is an ecological crisis. Recognition of biophysical and environmental limits drives the need for self-limitation. The challenge for direct democracy is to combine this understanding with institutions that can achieve a more ethical, just and equitable society.

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16
THE DEGROWTH DOUGHNUT

Mladen Domazet

Introduction: why new models and paradigms?

Research in various disciplines (Weiss and Cattaneo 2017; Kallis et al. 2018; Büchs and Koch 2019; Haberl et al. 2020; Vogel and Hickel 2023) and meta-analyses for policy development (Schipper et al. 2022; Creutzig et al. 2022) increasingly point out that degrowth thinking is essential in reorienting rich economies towards sustainability, universal needs satisfaction, social justice, sustainable well-being and greater democracy. But reorienting from a present unsustainable and ideologically unbounded linear expansion to smaller, frugal, ecologically diverse and publicly wealthy societies requires a planned reduction of some aspects of the social metabolism. For example, energy and resource use, inequality (Hickel 2021) and automobility (Durand et al. 2024). It also requires improvements – including quantitative increases – of human well-being (Hickel 2021), individual autonomy and low-impact food production.

To foster and navigate how these reductions and increases come about from an economic and social-cultural system that is often valuing the exact opposite – and portrays the society and nature by different means – requires a conceptualisation of a set of goals and ideas of a transformation plan that sharply turn away from the present system. The degrowth literature wants to avoid both the 'irrational' recession stages of the capitalist economies and foreseeable major disruptions to the transition process. It famously invokes an environmentally beneficial 'reduction of throughput by design, not disaster' (Victor 2019). The said 'design' implies a possibility of planning, of purposeful, managed, intentional and democratic (Parrique 2020) reduction of some aspects of the social metabolism and socio-cultural characteristics, as well as an increase in those deemed woefully insufficient now. This is in stark contrast with a neo-liberal conceptualisation of an exponential increase in economic value creation as the foremost societal goal, which ought to eventually be decoupled from its negative externalities (displaced destruction and dispossession).

The degrowth doughnut is a conceptual tool to aid planning and strategising in the degrowth scholarship and practices, where ecological and social planning is required for throughput reduction and social provisioning for all (Durand et al. 2024). By providing the initial focus on the basic expression of the guiding principles, the conceptual framework and the intellectual paradigm, it builds on the democratic organisation, counter-hegemonic visioning and needs prioritisation of the degrowth thinking about justice and sustainability. It complements the doughnut visualisation

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and doughnut economics' invitation to upturn economic thinking (Pulselli et al. 2016; DEAL undated(a)), and utilises mutual learning from comparative advantages and shortfalls between (more or less) adjacent units of analysis.

It is an attempt to make a paradigm shift in line with degrowth politics and accompanying social transformation (Nelson 2024; Dale and Fleckenstein 2023) but also a response to an initial stand-off between the ecological transition and improvement of socio-economic conditions. As Durand et al. (2024) argue, qualitative invitations for a better world free from known destruction and injustices are paralysed between needs-based and limits-based rationality imposed by the full world concept, and the cost-benefit rationality of the best known economistic strategising. While they rightly recognise that to replace the cost-benefit economising different planning is needed, conscious management of steps in a completely different conceptual environment (as the maximisation of newly created market value is not the right guide anymore) requires a quantitative assessment of different target distances, to support the decision-making processes. A guide to sizes of different challenges and potentials 'informed by bio-physical and social indicators and driven by deliberately stated social and ecological targets' (Durand et al. 2024) is visually summarised in the degrowth doughnut.

Yet the size of the challenges, and their radical decoupling from the unjust and unsustainable dominant *modus operandi*, makes the required planning seemingly impossible, or the desired goals unattainable through predominant modelling of the world. The degrowth doughnut addresses this planning and problem-solving task by presenting a broad set of key indicators ('vital signs') related to degrowth-informed targets and principles of social organisation, in a quantified and easy-to-grasp chart. The latter characteristic stems from the simple distance-to-target visualisation, a circular holistic presentation of a broad set of concepts usually presented in the simple colour scheme (where green represents good, and red represents bad) for performance assessment. In this chapter, the colour palette is replaced with black, grey and rasterised background (using grey to represent good, and black to represent bad, with fading indicating that black shapes stretch outside the plotting area). Coupled with the principle theory heuristic for paradigm change in the light of intellectual despair (Brown and Timpson 2006), the degrowth doughnut presents the operational space within which strategies of restoration, redistribution and democratic deliberation have to operate.

Shifting paradigms under pressure: phenomenological model heuristic

Future intellectual endeavour may reshape the causal modelling integrating complexities of social dynamics, human intentionality and possible non-human agency, and Earth-system trends that incorporate both the historic human impacts and contemporary zero-carbon transformations. For now, our conceptualisation of how these elements may causally interact is inadequate to proffer a stochastic projection of 'transformation', 'ecological collapse' or 'development' at different levels of scale. A readily available heuristic towards future causal modelling is laid down by phenomenological models (Giovanelli 2020) that respect the degrowth ideals and comparative attainments of different communities – such as the degrowth doughnut. The conceptual frameworks of phenomenological models or principle theories are based on an easily understandable vision of the desired end-state, rather than hidden and unsustainable assumptions about present-day energy balance and ideology interactions. The challenges of transformation in the 21st century require a policy and modelling ecosystem that can deliver a swift and radical transformation from the present state, whilst providing broad transparency and accountability for strategies and goals.

Conceptual frameworks and mental models supporting such a transformation ought to be consistent with a just and rapid socio-metabolic transition, and be able to illuminate the unsustainable aspects of the modern social metabolism that need to be replaced (Cherp et al. 2018; Hanger-Kopp et al. 2019). Yet the models built on the presently best available science and its preferred causal-mechanical explanatory paradigm (based on causal modelling) epistemically rest on the premises of the system as we know it today (Koppelaar et al. 2016; Trutnevyte et al. 2016). They then at best hamper, and likely misrepresent, the possibilities of emerging viable transition pathways; in other words, they operate within the existing development ideology and explanation of social metabolism (Kerschner et al. 2018; Saltelli and Giampietro 2017). They can then lead to disastrous deviations from reality (Woillez et al. 2020; McDonald and Shalizi 2022).

A review of our dominant modelling processes, in for example energy systems transition, shows that causal-mechanical modelling alone cannot adequately incorporate the requirements of a rapid transition and expose the inherent (initially invisible) biases that result in projections that poorly match the reality of hitherto initiated transition pathways (Sgouridis et al. 2022). In contemporary research of strategies and change there are calls to prioritise a clear articulation of the vision for the future desired end-state which can be communicated with the public and the stakeholders in advance (Kovacic and Giampietro 2015; Ernst et al. 2018). Based on the experience of a radical paradigm shift in physical sciences, the scope of possible pathways to the envisioned end-state can be realistically narrowed down by principle-theory expectations of universal norms that all possible processes have to obey. Doughnut visualisations are an operationalisation of a visual analytical and communication tool with quantified fair boundaries of sustainability and justice norms within which transformation pathways must fit.

Doughnut visualisations thus exemplify a set of measurable parameters of a vision of the desired end-state for which the transition steps will be democratically constructed after the guiding constraint space of pathways has been established. Degrowth doughnuts define the vision through topics addressed and quantified distance-to-target visualisations, which purposefully avoid the unrecognised technocratic bias in causal-mechanical models of environment-society interaction (Sgouridis et al. 2022). Doughnut visualisation operates as a tool for communication and analysis of the local contributions to unsustainability, social inertia and injustice. It does not just warn about the critical approach to (environmental) tipping points, but also about the success or failure of social distribution systems to provide sufficient well-being and restorative potential. It is a systemic overview of the drivers towards and anchors preventing falls over the brink, with indications of their different intensities in different locations and communities. The very structure of the visualisation rests on a conception of a sustainable prosperity and a measure of the current distance to the shared target. The distances are given by the size of the red wedges on both the outer and the inner rims of the green doughnut.

In an interconnected and pluri-perspectival world unexpected strengths and weaknesses of a community's reproduction and resilience practices are uncovered by comparing doughnut visualisations. Doughnut analysis applies to a functionally defined unit for which it is meaningful to express indicators of throughput, social institutions and attitudes; but most frequently national doughnuts are used as most attitudinal, socio-economic and environmental data is collected and systematised at the national level. Countries are also dominant political actors on a global scale, at least formally, and still the main representative institutions for individuals when it comes to agreeing, for example, to climate change mitigation and development strategies. But degrowth doughnuts have been constructed at municipal level as well (Domazet and Cik 2023; DEAL undated(b)).

A circular visualisation of a finite size deliberately avoids selecting some aspects as 'more central'. It treats, for example, carbon dioxide emissions, healthy life expectancy, per capita energy use and mutual distrust in societies as coequally important. Whilst providing for focus of attention on the most prominent differences, it prevents ignoring the differences in less conceptually connected thematic areas. Visual comparison, of course, compares two (similarly structured) images by eye, by placing them side by side or by overlaying them. It is similar to a well-known technique in scientific and engineering applications of visual comparison with a standard chart or reference as a means of simplifying complex phenomena. Degrowth doughnuts use the visual comparison as a common method of data analysis, a process of inspecting, cleansing, transforming and modelling data with the goal of discovering useful information, informing conclusions and supporting decision-making.

Visual methodologies, a collection of methods used to understand and interpret images, have been used for a while now as qualitative research methodologies in anthropology and sociology (Glaw et al. 2017) and engineering and technology (Joos et al. 2022). Degrowth doughnuts share their aims and techniques but are, nonetheless, a separate practice strongly connected to quantitative methodology because of its distance to target assessments. As Pauwels (2015) suggests, visual research is not just a study of the images but is an analytical working 'through' visuals and visualisations. Eventually what we perform is a data storytelling exercise that uses data-based visualisations to tell a story of societies' degrowth potential, which is not storytelling 'with data' (Matei and Hunter 2021). Doughnuts present a conceptual framework and analytical base to draw the audience's attention to possible unexpected relations between different countries' safe and just operating space (SJOS) (Pulselli et al. 2016) deviations.

The degrowth doughnut combines the invitation to precede modelling of transition pathways and transformation planning by visions of the desirable destination – a 21st-century set of transdisciplinary boundaries and thresholds defining human progress. By being a visual analysis tool it also uses the powerful new conceptual framework that the doughnut visualisations offer (DEAL undated(a)). By drawing on the degrowth principle of equitable distribution, at least in the present day, it downscales boundaries and thresholds of variables to unit-of-analysis level, offering a comparative analytical tool to assess resilience and progress against the specific 21st-century challenges and attainments (Domazet et al. 2020).

The degrowth doughnut is not a dynamic model displaying projections of interconnected changes of variables into past and future, or indicating the intensity of change of one variable with a change in the other. It is not based on a causal-mechanical model of the interaction between well-being, socio-economic structures and global environmental impacts of particular communities. It is a principle theory tool, according to the principle-constructive distinction in the history and philosophy of science (Howard and Giovanelli 2004). Given the urgency of global challenges and the thoroughgoing conceptual transformation that degrowth implies in some domains of research and experience, we cannot afford the lengthy and infinitesimal experimentation with a 'chaos of possibilities' (Giovanelli 2020) of theoretical models. Our immediate planning and deliberation ought to rest on simple and sturdy common ground of basic principles of a just and sustainable world.

In the early 20th century old physical sciences models failed and the new ones came in widely differing, yet empirically equivalent, forms. Some researchers at the time, most notably Albert Einstein (1919) in developing his Special Theory of Relativity, invoked a principle theory heuristic. That conceptual setup accepted that it was too early to make a causal model but that the quest for finding adequate explanations of physical processes had to continue. Principle theories provide an intellectual constraint space in which to seek specific novel conceptual connections appropriate

to a new paradigm, or even a whole new conceptual apparatus. They rely on self-standing and well-confirmed empirical generalisations, a set of obvious rules and limitations that any detailed understanding of processes in question will eventually have to respect. Thermodynamic theories of heat transfer and work were the paradigmatic model. They did not speculate about the nature of matter, but still extracted general rules about how heat transfers from hot to cold and how much useful work is generally available from such transfers.

Likewise, the degrowth doughnut constrains the overall abstract space containing people's needs satisfaction in relation to energy sources and distribution systems (Brajdić Vuković and Domazet 2022). It also specifies the enabling and limiting values and attitudes prevalent in a given society. This constraint is based on the quantification of tipping points and desirable attainments for indicators reflecting these concepts from the said abstract conceptual space. But the boundary values are not based on the suspected causal interactions of the elements of the doughnut. Each variable's boundary or threshold value is based on its importance for the stated guiding vision. The visualisation provides in a single image how far the biophysical impacts and social structures can go to stay fair and sustainable, an abstract space representing the general desired vision, with different possible (and as yet unknown) specific dynamic states.

In this chapter we will show degrowth doughnut visualisations developed for analytical and educational purposes elsewhere, but all doughnuts share the structure of boundaries and thresholds, as well as three segments generally related to biophysical, socio-economic and cultural (or political or ideological) goals. The actual selection of indicators representing the boundaries and thresholds, defining the constraints on possible strategies, is to be developed in dialogue with the community members. It addresses their pressing concerns and specificities, thus reflecting the constructivist nature of social and cultural constraints, and supplementing the scientific planetary boundaries with appropriately meaningful regional contributions.

Structure of the doughnut model from a degrowth-oriented perspective

The planetary boundaries visualisation (Rockström et al. 2009) used a circular disc with sections corresponding to the nine key variables, whose boundary overloads could rapidly tip the whole Earth system into a new state. The colouring of the wedges within and beyond the disc indicates in a clear image whether the boundaries normalised to the circle's rim have been crossed or not (Rockström et al. 2009) as in Figure 16.1. The doughnut economics visualisation has modified the

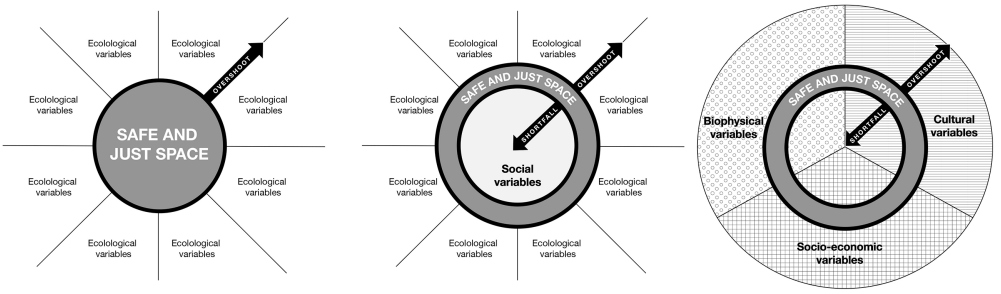

Figure 16.1 Schematic representation of evolution of doughnut images. Drawn, from right to left, planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009), doughnut economics (Raworth 2017a), to the degrowth doughnut (Domazet et al. 2020), with the graphic modified from Domazet et al. (2023).

circular disc of the planetary boundaries visualisation into a (North American) doughnut shape, by including a smaller circle inside the boundaries' disc (Raworth 2012). The inner circle quantified the thresholds of attaining dignified material and social development for a human population. The added coloured wedges, inside the hole of the doughnut, indicated the size of the shortfall in attaining the set development threshold (measured by the chosen indicator). The threshold was expressed as a value of the chosen indicator, for example proportion of population with access to electricity, or access to education for 15-year-olds.

The visualisation exercises eventually led to a full-blown analytical and policy modelling framework of doughnut economics developed by Kate Raworth (2017a) and research groups around the world. It has since gained traction in academia, political decision-making processes, progressive business, urbanism and civil society in order to help reconceptualise expectations from sustainable development (Raworth 2017b). In line with the sustainable development goals, classic doughnut visualisation rests on the imperative to take the ecological aspects into account (boundaries) while evaluating human development attainments (thresholds). The inner circle presents the attainment of the social foundations, infrastructural and institutional instruments for satisfying human needs. The outer circle represents the contributions to pressure against the ecological ceiling beyond which planetary burdens should not be continuously applied, as in the original planetary boundaries visualisation.

A degrowth doughnut visualisation contains biophysical, socio-economic and cultural segments, each with a visualisation of boundary transgressions and threshold shortfalls (Figure 16.2). The boundaries and thresholds define a scaled-down SJOS concept – the green (grey here) circular belt of the doughnut. It respects the imperative of the original doughnut images (Raworth 2017a;

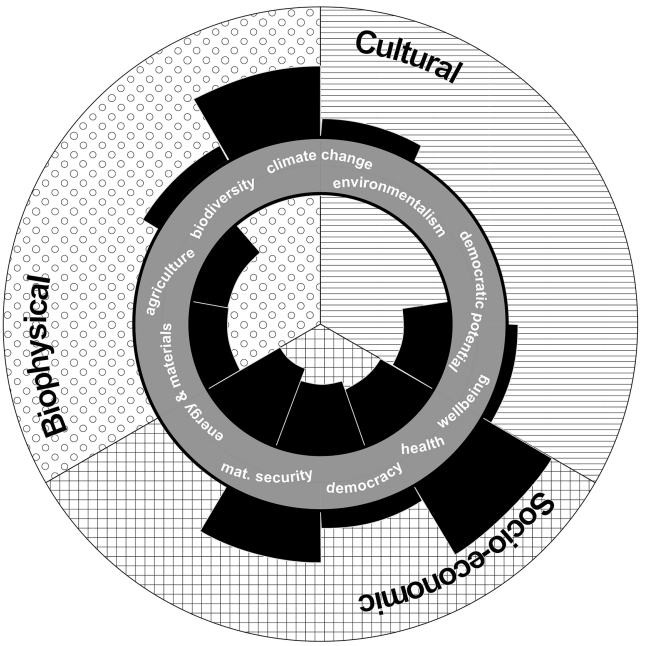

Figure 16.2 Degrowth doughnut: schematic illustration of structure and possible quantification of present distance-to-targets. Themes to be reflected in indicators are listed along the doughnut ring – modified for B/W rendering from IPE (undated).

O'Neill et al. 2018) to visualise the distance from target for fair and environmentally sustainable impact and attainment. The red bars (black here) along both the inner and outer edges of the doughnut indicate that the current interactions between the human population and the local or global biosphere result in excesses and shortfalls (quantified by the size of the red – black here – wedges). This does not imply that shortcomings in achieving the goals of the inner-ring causally impact the transgressions on the outer-ring. This was not an axiomatic assumption of doughnut economics visualisations either, but the empirical analysis strongly suggested that development attainments incurred unsustainable environmental costs (Fanning et al. 2022). A degrowth doughnut quantifies shortfalls in nature restoration, as well as in popular support for environmental and social justice, and in institutions of post-carbon democratic governance.

Along the outer rim, following the planetary boundaries visualisation, the degrowth doughnut recognises that with respect to fair-share downscaling, countries exert excessive biophysical loading, societal injustices and average value orientations that obstruct cooperative action towards ecological stability and resilience. The biophysical boundaries are expressed in climate change drivers, biodiversity loss drivers and agricultural impacts. Socio-economic boundaries translate these into energy use per capita, national material footprint, measures of debt and workloads. These are the degrowth theory societal components related to biophysical boundaries, as well as theoretical constraints and radical metabolic transformation. They are complemented by the boundaries in measures of inequalities detrimental to democratic representation and health impacts of the contemporary food market. In the cultural segment, boundaries are expressed in popular perceptions of shortcomings in democratic potential and well-being, such as lack of interpersonal trust, and popular misunderstanding of and opposition to global environmental action.

Dominance of anthropocentric values in society, for example, is an obstacle to democratically supported action on global environmentalism in line with a degrowth vision (Escobar 2019). Distrust (a lack of social trust), corruption perception and democratic deficit perception are all obstacles to coordinated societal action on radical transformation for just sustainability, just as carbon dioxide emissions are an obstacle to planetary climate change mitigation (biophysical segment). They symbolise tipping points in a socio-cultural matrix, depicting socio-cultural conditions in which the democratic support for a radical transformation is precluded or even actively suppressed. Just like unfair individual national contributions to exceeding global biophysical tipping points (such as greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions exceeding 2t per capita), they don't yet imply absolutely irreversible aggregate global change, but rather an unfair contribution towards global tipping points in key degrowth domains for sustainability. In summary, as downscaling of pollution contribution aims to fairly share the pressure on the Earth system and other societies (O'Neill et al. 2018), specific national cultural and socio-economic pressures on tipping points of social justice, good life and environmental action present an unfair contribution to global challenges.

Following the degrowth vision, the degrowth doughnut visualisation includes the socio-economic boundaries in energy and material circulation according to a fairly shared national per capita allocation. It sets the energy use per capita at roughly the pre-industrial level, to elevate the efficiency gains attained since early industrialisation and to account for the realistic runaway climate change mitigation within this century, in line with the carbon budget for the energy infrastructure transformation (Slameršak et al. 2022). Likewise, the material footprint is bounded by the recommended materials use proscription per capita, including raw materials extraction through trade flows and domestic material extraction (Wiedmann et al. 2015). Finally, the household debt burden and working hours in contemporary societies affect both the ecological footprint of populations and their availability for personal and interpersonal care. The gender inequality index quantifies one of the fundamental injustices still prevalent in contemporary societies. Other indicators quantifying

aspects of themes positioned along the ring of the doughnut are available, for example in a full list in the Degrowth Donut database of Zagreb's Institute for Political Ecology (IPE undated).

Based on the original doughnut economy visualisation of attainment rather than boundary limits, the inner rim represents the lower bounds of a set of measures that require *strengthening* or *increasing* in the degrowth world. They are identified in all three segments, in line with the resilience and restoration of ecosystem stability and social and individual well-being in the 21st century. The chosen indicators present national averages in healthy life expectancy, poverty eradication and voter turnout as the basic objective measures of democratic functioning and institutional welfare protection. They are complemented by the average national attitude (distance to target of mean survey response in a national sample) in economy-environment trade-off perception, average national life satisfaction score and average support for global environmentalism scale. These are important popular attitudes and perceptions for coordinated global action on environmental stabilisation, as well as tracking of average national well-being attainment.

But the foundational attainment in the degrowth vision under 21st-century development constraints includes more than socio-economic development and popular attitudinal and shared values attainments. Nature is no longer just a limiting factor for 'development' on a full planet, it is also a part of the shared goal of protection and restoration. Degrowth in the 21st century also includes pro-active restoration of ecosystem resilience and different management of natural resources. The inner ring of the degrowth doughnut visualisation thus includes the proportion of national area under wilderness protection regimes (national parks and the like) that minimise human influence and leave space for ecosystem regeneration. The share of agricultural area under organic (or similar low-impact) production regime is included for promotion of lower-impact agriculture. Finally, national area under forest coverage is also included to account for the carbon sinks provided by forests. Again, further targets such as soil stability under erosion or flood protection infrastructure are available (IPE undated).

The visualisations of national degrowth doughnuts illustrated here contain the distance to target information in the size (complemented by shading where necessary) of the red (here black) wedges outside (crossing the boundary) and inside (falling short of the foundation) of the doughnut ring. They merge into a single visualisation a target and an indicator as a single number defining the 'distance to target' or 'gap', which stands at the core of the doughnut economics conceptual framework. The advantages of such an analytical tool include a straightforward overview of what should be reached against the present state; a potential simplicity of computation that is broadly accessible beyond narrow expert circles; a faming of the analysis in resilience-relevant concepts of costs of current practices and means of 'bridging the gap'; and an easy tool for prioritising areas of action by comparison of visual distances.

But is it a *degrowth* doughnut? Principles, values and specific concepts

The degrowth doughnut is designed to reflect basic degrowth principles rather than those of sustainable development or ecomodernisation (Domazet et al. 2020), and to be a useful contribution to degrowth politics and strategies. Like all mental models based on doughnut economics, it acknowledges the global environmental and social justice crises. The severity of the environmental crisis, the most important strategic question of this century, is represented by the measures of climate change drivers (most notably GHG emissions and land use change), but also by attainment in upholding carbon sinks such as forests. No less important is the loss of biodiversity and overburdening of geochemical cycles with excessive fertiliser loading, as well as the planned safety zones for biodiversity protection (protected wild areas measures).

Despite depicting quantified distance-to-target, even on these easy-to-include and justify examples, it is clear that every quantification has its qualitative context on the ground. A mere tick-off for a set of indicator values that are within a safe and just operating space range is not on its own an understanding of a degrowth paradigm. A society that does not contribute to any boundary pressures whilst reaching all of the attainment thresholds would still have an important story to tell and planet Earth to co-protect. Providing decent healthy life expectancy without GHG emissions and corrupt institutions would be a success from the standpoint of most other societies, but would still carry a contextual narrative that calls for a deeper analysis. In putting the findings of the doughnut to use, it is important to explore, in the participatory and self-determinative manner of degrowth, how a good value is obtained and distributed across the society in one country and not in another.

The very assessment of the value as initially egregious or on the right track provides the intellectual ground for acknowledgement of its importance, its coupling or decoupling with the standard economic performance measures, and initial understanding of its qualitative dimensions. It immediately invites a programme of future exploration of its eventual causal connection with other key variables. For example, terrestrial forest cover differs in its carbon sink quality and climate change resilience by virtue of old-growth versus plantation forest types. But a concentration of the national strategy discussion on the forest coverage (in quantity and quality) and its comparison to other nations or regions is more important for the degrowth transition than the focus on econometrics of consumer goods production. It connects the social strategies to the broader situation within the ecological and cultural context. Similar considerations apply to other topical constituents of the biophysical segment of the degrowth doughnut. Inclusion of food-production-related indicators, such as the type of farming practised on the arable land, connects feeding the human population to the degrowth doughnut's ecological and socio-cultural elements.

By downscaling the appropriate measures (mostly the planetary footprint contributions) as per capita values, the degrowth doughnut aims for a fair distribution of responsibility in pushing towards the planetary tipping points. Of course, even that is not ultimately 'fair' as each individual has a unique contribution to drivers, as well as to mitigation, care for the vulnerable (human and non-human) and adaptation of the whole communities to this situation. But it moves away from the discredited environmental Kuznets curve (Stern 2004) that shifts the environmental burden of overdevelopment and 'green wealth', and goes a long way to highlight the vast differences between nations hidden within the unifying concept of the Anthropocene (Brajdić Vuković and Domazet 2022). Most importantly, it goes a long way towards practically valuing all humans equally, rather than strategising 'human' planetary survival on the chances of the best-positioned or wealthy few.

In line with the relatively open social organisation strategy of the international degrowth movement, or rather the pluriversal nature of organisation of social reproduction in line with universal justice principles and global sustainability, the degrowth doughnut does not specify the measures implicitly associated with capitalism or productivist socialism. There are no indicators advocating for explicit growth of throughput or for accumulation of a material or energy stock, or of a commodity. There are also no indicators tracking 'carbon markets', 'compensation mechanisms', 'alternative fuel', 'strategic minerals stock' and other economic 'instruments' of sustainable development. The degrowth doughnut does not presuppose what kind of society will replace the present system, and that is not its role; just as 'degrowth in itself is not an alternative economic and social perspective' (Löwy 2023) but a horizon (Kallis and March 2015) or even the ultimate goal (Hermann 2022). In line with recent mutual sympathies between ecosocialism and degrowth (Dale, Chapter 33, this volume), it is open to serving the post-capitalist transition with a focus on democratic participation and elimination of poverty (De Schutter, Chapter 26, this volume), as well as

alleviation of job dissatisfaction, work-time reduction (Houtbeckers, Chapter 22, this volume) and average life satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the degrowth doughnut is clear about the absolute global limits in current and transitional energy throughput, and material extraction associated with the 'private riches' (Hickel 2019) that are part of the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2021, Chapter 27, this volume). Given that even renewable energies need raw materials that are not infinite nor extractable without ecological consequences, and that the very transition requires some of the remaining fossil fuel budget for infrastructure transformation, the degrowth doughnut recognises the substantial caps necessary on per capita energy use and material footprint. Whilst this is the most recognisable degrowth distinction within various sustainability transformation strategies, the degrowth doughnut neither fetishises nor focuses exclusively on these limitations of throughput and production. The single doughnut ring couples these real-world sobrieties with indicators for aspirational participation, health, education, poverty elimination, care for the natural world and personal well-being.

The degrowth doughnut is not a visual tool illustrating a reductivist quantitative list of limitations on human activity, just as degrowth is not a purely reductivist limitation of all purposeful action. It is honest about the need to plan and execute the future transition to greater emancipation and environmental sustainability, including resilient biodiversity. This transformation takes place in multiple complementary dimensions (like segments and themes of the degrowth doughnut) that are bounded by both restoration and stability of Earth's biophysical systems, and support systems for a flourishing cultural emancipation (Medak et al. 2020). It deviates sharply from what are standardly considered the key elements of environmental sustainability and socio-economic development. This is not because many of those are erroneously included in accounts of just sustainability, but because they are insufficient for depicting the severity of the crisis. The models that *status quo* rests on have, for decades, been used to justify (in increasingly deviant ways, admittedly) the complacency before environmental and social justice crises, whilst the very drivers of disaster, like GHG emissions, grew exponentially. Degrowth itself is also, in part, a reaction to this paradox (Domazet 2017).

A political strategy of degrowth transformation requires quantitative guidance alongside elaboration of a qualitative transformation. On top of the emphasis on doing things differently (Demaria and Latouche 2019), from allocation of time between paid and non-paid work to flow and utilisation of energy, there is still a genuine need to quantitatively reduce the environmental and social burdens and to quantitatively increase the attainments in social justice and average well-being. Politically, a degrowth critique of the growth-base of capitalism is reflected in the degrowth doughnut's exclusion of property and wealth accounting. It opens the way for deepening democracy, in the first instance by measuring perceptions of the quality of existing democratic institutions and the objective participation of the population in elections. In presenting the social infrastructure for more democracy, in line with degrowth politics, it also includes measures of gender inequality and expected educational attainment of young people.

In line with the degrowth political critique of the needs and desires presented in capitalist society, the degrowth doughnut does not include measures of income or access to commodities but rather focuses on eradication of poverty risk, average household debt burden and healthy life expectancy. At the same time the single doughnut ring combines these with sobriety (moderation) often lacking on the political Left, in recognising that radical reductions in per capita energy use and material processing are needed, mostly in the richest countries. Political aims of degrowth such as greater equality and democracy, more egalitarian power distribution, less time in paid work, greater life satisfaction and access to public luxuries are quantified in the socio-economic and cultural segments of the degrowth doughnut. Most importantly, it does not

include the quantifications behind political veneration of technology fetishism, which sees just sustainability as an automated luxury communism that miraculously transcends limits of minerals and water extraction, and agro-industrial pollution.

Global South cases: Bolivia and Bangladesh

It is well-established in degrowth thinking that the drivers of planetary degrowth must be based in the industrialised North (North America, Europe, Japan and Australia), which is also responsible for the greatest historical environmental impact. The biophysical and socio-economic segments of the degrowth doughnuts in Figure 16.3 reflect that understanding through data visualisation.

AC	**Anthropocentrism**	**HE**	**Healthy Life Expectancy**
CN	Climate Change Nonchalance	**VT**	Voter Turnout
DT	Distrust	**RE**	Renewable Energy
JD	Job Dissatisfaction	**NU**	Nitrogen Use
RP	Renewables Prioritization	**PU**	Phosphate Use
DS	Degrowth Support	**WU**	Water Use
LS	Life Satisfaction	**BN**	Biodiversity Neglect
GI	Gender Inequality	**CE**	CO_2 Emissions
OW	Overwork	**SS**	Soil Stability
EU	Energy Use	**WP**	Wilderness Protection
MU	Materials Use	**FA**	Forested Area
Indicator labels in black lack data for given countries (see Appendix for full data table)			

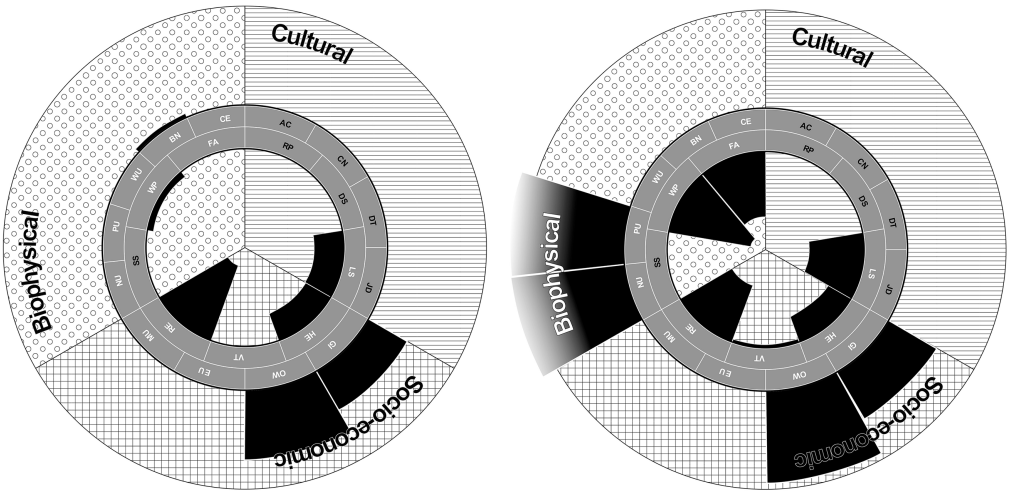

Figure 16.3 Global South degrowth doughnut visualisations: Bolivia (left) and Bangladesh (right). Modified for B/W rendering from IPE (undated).

Both represent doughnuts for countries from the Global South, with different geographies, histories, 20th-century development trajectories and present-day metabolisms. In both, climate and biodiversity loss drivers – carbon emissions (CE), biodiversity neglect (BN), water use (WU) – are not significant, and the energy and material throughputs – energy use (EU) and materials use (MU) – are within the doughnut targets. Both countries in this example also need 'development' processes that will lead to wider basic needs satisfaction for their populations (Löwy 2023), for example evidenced by shortfalls on average life satisfaction (LS) and healthy life expectancy (HE).

Differences in the challenges they face appear in the stark contrast in agriculture and food production-related data. Whilst both are in need of a much greater renewable energy generation (RE), even at low per capita energy use (EU) that characterises both countries, the country of the right-hand degrowth doughnut currently overloads its food production with forest loss (FA and WP shortfalls) and fertilisers (PU and NU), whilst the left-hand one does not. The lesson of this simple analysis would be that the left-hand doughnut country shares the principles of peasant biological agriculture based on small-scale and cooperative regenerative production, in line with the South-based ecological transition (Löwy 2023).

As a planning and strategy instrument, as well as a foundation for a deliberative prioritisation of restoration and redistribution projects, the degrowth doughnut is both a compass for the future and a diagnostic tool for present-day struggles. It does not project a future time, an ideal conjunction of social and environmental conditions, when the conditions will be ripe for a local contribution to a global just sustainability transformation. By comparing the strengths and challenges of different domains in their respective geophysical settings and prevalent socio-cultural conditions in the present, as measured against the desirable target in the transformed near future, degrowth doughnuts point to cultural and political low-hanging fruit in relation to biophysical and economic targets. Thereby, they illuminate the unexpected connections between the seemingly unrelated socio-metabolic aspects and processes as might be expected of a phenomenological model.

European cases: Germany and Hungary

It is particularly important to understand where alliances can be built and where organisation for change differs, for example in two rich Global North European countries (core and semi-periphery, from the perspective of world-systems theory) in Figure 16.4. Despite distinctive 20th-century development trajectories, and different challenges in climate change drivers (CE, LU), energy and materials use (EU, MU) and carbon sinks potential (FA, WP), both countries exhibit popular attitudes prerequisite for a degrowth transformation degrowth transformation (CD, EP) and enjoy an almost satisfactory participation in basic democratic processes (VT). Social distrust (DT) is a similar challenge for both, but in the right-hand doughnut the popular perception of presence of corruption (CP) in society and the dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy (QD) are more urgent challenges to collective action for degrowth transformation. Average life satisfaction (LS) exhibits a greater shortfall, though, suggesting an even greater urgency to satisfy the existing needs of the population.

In the left-hand doughnut country, though, the average household debt burden (DR) is much higher, despite similar prevalence of poverty risk in the population (SE). A shared challenge for the two countries' populations is to present a degrowth-inspired vision that would reduce drivers of environmental crisis on the basis of similar values, but different governance structures (given

CD	**Climate Change Denialism**	**VT**	**Voter Turnout**
EP	Economy Priority	**SE**	Social Equality
DT	Distrust	**RE**	Renewable Energy
CP	Corruption Perception	**NU**	Nitrogen Use
HP	Health Perception	**PU**	Phosphate Use
LS	Life Satisfaction	**BL**	Biodiversity Loss
QD	Quality of Democracy	**LU**	Land-use Intensity
GI	Gender Inequality	**CE**	CO_2 Emissions
DR	Household Debt Ratio	**SS**	Soil Stability
MU	Materials Use	**WP**	Wilderness Protection
EU	Energy Use	**FA**	Forest Area

Note that some boundary transgression values exceed more than twice the boundary value and are faded out of the plotting area. See Appendix for raw data values).

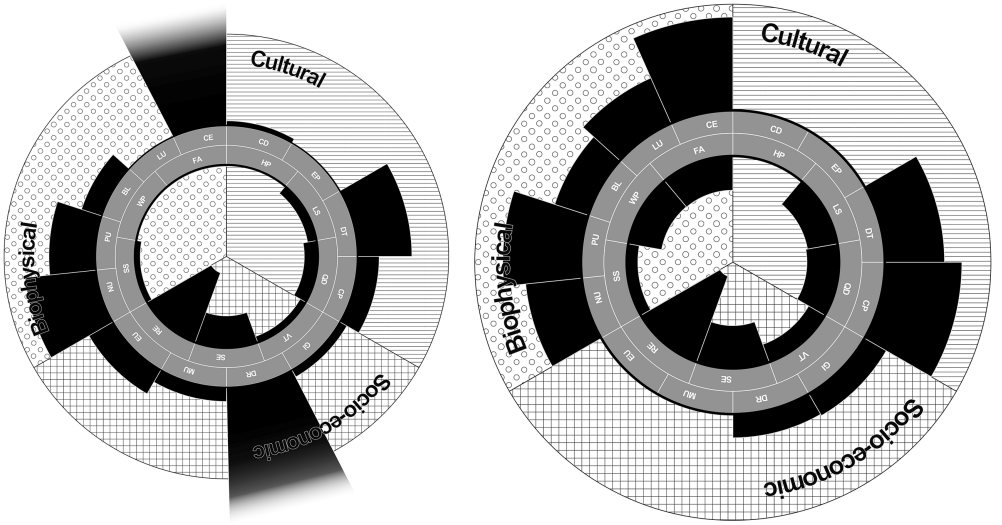

Figure 16.4 Global North degrowth doughnut visualisations for Germany (left) and Hungary (right). Modified for B/W rendering from Domazet et al. (2023).

corruption and quality of democracy perceptions). This tells us that probably, despite a shared geographical region (Europe) and similar shortfalls in renewable energy infrastructure (RE), the two countries' subjects of struggle for degrowth will differ in social composition and instruments affecting the pathway to the vision goal (Löwy 2023). The slightly different power of women (GI) will likely play a role, but so will that of peasants reliant on pollution loading and attainments in land management and food production (Biophysical segment indicators).

Conclusion

Degrowth and doughnut visualisation call for a reconceptualisation of economic theory and policymaking, turning away from gross domestic product (GDP) growth towards a vision that seeks to prioritise systemic regeneration and internal redistribution to '[bring humanity back] into the doughnut' (Raworth 2017a). The original doughnut chart invites a balance between pressures on natural systems and attainment of social benefits of development. But to serve as a comprehensive planning paradigm for radical transformation, a doughnut visualisation must also recognise that environmental impacts and development inadequacies come from dominant power relations, dominant societal values and norms (Brand et al. 2021), rather than mere (historical) ignorance. A doughnut visualisation lacking accounts of popular attitudes and prevalent values is thus insufficient to give a democratic perspective on justice and sustainability. The *degrowth* doughnut aims to use the principle-theory generalised constraints on normative outlook about the desired future to expand doughnut visualisation into a paradigm enhanced by degrowth thinking.

When only combining the planetary boundaries' outer ring with 'social foundations' inner ring, the original doughnut's structure of nature–society relations suggests a trade-off between the destruction of nature (boundaries) and the attainment of human well-being (thresholds) as a necessary foundational logic of societal reproduction. It thus remains trapped in the ecomodernist efficiency-of-provision paradigm. Moreover, by focusing the boundaries exclusively in the natural domain, the classical doughnut model allows for an expectation of techno-optimist, as yet unproven, fixes for pollution (boundary transgression). Such expectations set a horizon directing the action against the degrowth-rooted understanding of the role of technology in society, contradicting the holistic understanding of resilience and flourishing (Andrea Vetter and Matthias Fersterer, Chapter 14, this volume). They also ignore the present-day needs for nature-restoration and impact reduction. Ecomodernist and techno-optimistic fixes of the environmental boundary transgressions (in overdeveloped nations currently, and in developing nations in the anticipated future) ignore the known root causes of unsustainability (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo 2015) in the very expectation of limitless material and energy throughput.

The very structure of the classical doughnut model and visualisation leaves the social development aspirations as boundless; it ignores the necessary societal boundaries paradigm emerging out of concrete examples and degrowth theory. By introducing social and cultural boundaries, and conversely aspirational thresholds for nature regeneration, a degrowth-inspired modification of the doughnut model seeks to incorporate 'a change of analytical and political perspectives: rather than thinking of the planet as bounded'; we need 'to think of the planet as potentially abundant – as long as we limit ourselves collectively and make space for others to share the resources it has to offer in a responsible way among current living and future generations' (Brand et al. 2021, p. 276).

As a planning tool, a mental model of the possible transition space between the present and the vision, the degrowth doughnut leaves the exact choice of quantified variables to a communal strategy-building process. As long as flourishing and care are considered equally for nature, society and communal spirit in a constructive comparison – rather than cut-throat competition – it vividly illustrates how the degrowth transformation is, in the words of (Borras 2020), 'absurdly difficult but not impossible'.

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APPENDICES

Table 16.1 Data values, sources and boundary/threshold values for Figure 16.3. (For abbreviations in column 2, see legend with Figure 16.3). Drawn from Bolivia and Bangladesh data at IPE (undated).

INDICATOR	Abbr.	Bolivia	Bangladesh	B or T	UNIT (good>bad)	SOURCE
Nitrogen Use	NU	4.26	136.41	45	kg/ha/yr	Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations (FAO, UN) – (FAOSTAT database)
Phosphate Use	PU	2.28	74.29	10.32	kg/ha/yr	FAO of the UN (FAOSTAT database)
Water Use	WU	0.36	2.92	40	% total renewable water resources/yr	FAO of the UN (AQUASTAT – Global Information System on Water and Agriculture)
Soil Stability	SS	-	-	0	% of area at risk of severe soil erosion	EUROSTAT Joint Research Centre Data Catalogue
Biodiversity Neglect	BN	35.46	36.71	33.79	100–MCI score	Lindsey et al. (2017)
Wilderness Protection	WP	30.87	tra.89	33	% of territory as protected area	World Bank
CO_2 Emissions	CE	1.85	0.51	2	t/cap/yr	European Commission Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research
Forest Area	FA	50.29	10.96	33	% of total land area	World Bank
Distrust	DT	-	-	7.5	Mean value (10>1)	European Social Survey (2012)
Degrowth Support	DS	-	-	50	% of responses	European Values Study (2017)
Anthropocentrism	AC	-	-	9	Mean value (12>3)	European Values Study (2008)
Climate Change Nonchalance	CN	-	-	50	% of responses	European Social Survey (2016)
Renewable Energy Priority	RP	-	-	66.6	% of responses	International Social Survey Programme (2010)

(*Continued*)

Table 16.1 (Continued)

INDICATOR	Abbr.	Bolivia	Bangladesh	B or T	UNIT (good>bad)	SOURCE
Job Dissatisfaction	JD	-	-	7.5	Mean value (10>1)	European Values Study (2008)
Life Satisfaction	LS	svi.92	4.svi	7.5	Mean value (10>0)	World Happiness Report (2019)
Gender Inequality	GI	0.45	0.54	0	UNDP GI index score	UN Development Programme
Voter Turnout	VT	86.53	78.06	80	% of voting age population turnout	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
Energy Use	EU	0.03	0.01	0.1	TJ/cap/yr	US Energy Information Administration and World Bank
Materials Use	MU	4.7	1.69	15	Material Footprint per capita (t/cap/yr)	Wiedmann et al. (2015)
Renewable Energy	RE	17.54	34.75	90	% of total final energy consumption	World Bank
Healthy Life Expectancy	HE	63	63.3	70	Healthy life expectancy (HALE) at birth (years)	World Health Organization
Overwork	OW	43.16	46.93	32	hrs/week	International Labour Organization (ILOSTAT)

Table 16.2 Description of indicators and data sources for Germany and Hungary used in Figure 16.4. For abbreviations see legend with Figure 16.4. Drawn from Domazet et al. (2023).

Name	Abbreviation	Description	Data source
Climate Change Denialism	CD	Inverse of the percentage of respondents that answered with 'true' to three survey questions concerning climate change for a given country	European Investment Bank Climate Survey
Economy Priority	EP	Percentage of those picking 'growth of the economy and creating jobs' over 'protecting the environment' in a survey question for a given country	World Values Survey, European Values Study
Distrust	DT	Mean value of corresponding variable ('ppltrst') measuring social trust for a given country	European Social Survey
Corruption Perception	CP	Mean value for a given country of the additive index composed of certain variables (V5, V6 and V7 from ISSP survey)	International Social Survey Programme
Health Perception	HP	Mean value of a corresponding variable measuring subjective health for a given country	World Values Survey, European Values Study
Life Satisfaction	LS	Mean value of self-reported life satisfaction for a given country	World Happiness Report
Quality of Democracy	QD	Mean value of corresponding variable (E236) measuring quality of democracy for a given country	World Values Survey, European Values Study
Gender Inequality	GI	UN Gender Inequality index score for a given country	Human Development Report
Household Debt Ratio	DR	Average household debt-to-income ratio for a given country	Eurostat
Materials Use	MU	Material footprint per capita for a given country (t/cap)	Vienna University of Economics and Business, Material Flow Analysis Portal
Energy Use	EU	Energy consumption per capita for a given country (TJ/cap)	Our World in Data
Voter Turnout	VT	% of voting age population turnout for a given country	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
Social Equality	SE	Ratio of population not at risk of poverty or social exclusion for a given country	Eurostat
Renewable Energy	RE	Renewable energy consumption (% of total final energy consumption) for a given country	Eurostat

(*Continued*)

Table 16.2 (Continued)

Name	Abbreviation	Description	Data source
Soil Stability	SS	Percentage of area under risk of severe soil loss by water erosion (E>10 tons per hectare) for a given country	Eurostat
Wilderness Protection	WP	Terrestrial and inland waters protected area coverage (% of total terrestrial area) for a given country	Protected Planet
Forest Area	FA	Forest area coverage (% of land area) for a given country	World Bank
Nitrogen Use	NU	Nutrient nitrogen N (total) fertiliser use per area of cropland for a given country	UN FAO (FAOSTAT)
Phosphate Use	PU	Nutrient phosphate P2O5 (total) fertiliser use per area of cropland for a given country	UN FAO, (FAOSTAT)
Biodiversity Loss	BL	Inverse of Biodiversity Intactness Index for a given country	Natural History Museum
Land-use Intensity	LU	The ratio of urban and agricultural land per capita (ha/pc) in total land area of a given country	World Bank
CO_2 Emissions	CE	CO_2 emissions per capita for a given country	Emissions Database for Global Atmospheric Research, European Commission

17

FRUGAL ABUNDANCE

Meaning in practice in an Icelandic village

Adrien Plomteux

Introduction

The phrase 'frugal abundance' has been mentioned in numerous degrowth publications, such as Schmelzer et al. (2022), Liegey and Nelson (2020) and Parrique (2020). Kallis et al. (2022, p. 2) even state that it captures 'the essence of degrowth'. Frugal abundance intuitively refers to the idea of being rich, prosperous and abundant without high levels of production and consumption of material goods by relying more on the satisfaction of what is deemed *enough* through services, such as caring and conviviality.

'Frugal abundance' arose in the English literature especially through Serge Latouche's use of the notion in French (Latouche 2011), but its origins date back to the 1970s and involves degrowth precursors such as André Gorz, Jacques Ellul and Enrico Berlinguer. It was at the heart of early French-speaking degrowth (François Jarrige and Vincent Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume) and can be said to have re-emerged in recent years. Nevertheless, degrowth academic work has not yet deeply engaged with the concept. Plomteux (2024) provides substance to a degrowth-compatible understanding of frugal abundance from which a few characteristics are worth mentioning.

The notion is strongly linked to the seminal essay *The Original Affluent Society* by Marshall Sahlins (2017 [1972]), in which he argues that some societies were rich without consuming much in the way of goods. Sahlins (2017 [1972], p. 1) defined an affluent society as 'one in which all the people's material wants are easily satisfied', and that the appropriate strategy to achieve such affluence was to base desires on what is easily producible. Such societies and their inhabitants are rich not because of their amount of consumption or because they use a lot of energy and resources, but because they have everything that they want.

Frugal abundance entails the collective definition of 'enough' so that current and future generations, particularly the most marginalised, as well as the non-human world, have the means to live well. Therefore, frugal abundance from a degrowth perspective is a strongly collective project. As a result, it differs from voluntary simplicity (Alexander 2015). Additionally, the notion requires a predominantly immaterial understanding of abundance, based on elements such as time, caring, flourishing, justice, cultural richness, solidarity, love, trust or wisdom.

Further developed, the notion of frugal abundance might unleash some as yet (in 2024) untouched potential for the degrowth movement (Plomteux 2024). In terms of communication,

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it could be part of powerful counter-hegemonic narratives, because it can relate to still-existing popular cultures or dormant common senses. Conceptually, as degrowth is often defined as a 'process of transformation' (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 195), frugal abundance could be seen as one of the end goals or even capturing the essence of degrowth-inspired visions of the future (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 2). As such, it can act as a rudder for radical change.

I propose a definition of a society of frugal abundance as a society in which everyone has a good life, consumption is low enough to achieve global ecological and social justice, and the material wants of everyone are satisfied (Plomteux 2024). Crucially, in order not to reproduce colonial relationships, the notion of frugal abundance should leave ample space for communities to interpret it and make it their own, in their own culture and worldviews. In particular, following Escobar (2018, pp. 141, 143), I advocate for autonomous and pluriversal designs of the good life and enough so that 'every community practices the design of itself' and 'dominant and subaltern worlds can be partially connected, even co-produce each other, while remaining distinct'.

Consequently, here I focus on what frugal abundance means in a particular community in which I carried out fieldwork research in May 2022. This community, Djúpivogur, is a remote village in East Iceland of slightly more than 500 inhabitants who mainly live from fishing, tourism, construction and agriculture. It is part of the Cittaslow movement, which was created as a spin-off of the Slow Food movement and aims to apply the principles of the slow philosophy to small towns (Mayer and Knox 2006).

Although the slow and degrowth movements emerged independently, certain people at least elsewhere engaged with one another about their similarities. For instance, two of their most influential actors Carlo Petrini, and Serge Latouche (2020, pp. 119–20), see them as complementary. Given that the Djúpivogur community didn't advocate for degrowth or use the phrase frugal abundance, I never used the term 'degrowth' during fieldwork as it was likely to cause unnecessary misinterpretations. In doing so, I follow the research tradition that engages with communities through a degrowth lens even if they do not know about or advocate for degrowth. Other examples of research following this approach include Slavomíra Ferenčuhová et al. Chapter 9, this volume, on 'accidental' degrowth; some of the cases in Marula Tsagkari et al. Chapter 10, this volume; and Christie and Salong (2018) on housing in Vanuatu.

Since Djúpivogur inhabitants were not familiar with the expression 'frugal abundance', the research started by spelling out the meaning of Cittaslow in the community. From this point on, villagers were asked to delineate the similarities and differences between the two concepts from their own perspectives. As such, the meaning of frugal abundance in Djúpivogur was built. The relevant data was collected during the first day of a four-day participatory backcasting workshop involving 14 community members as well as during nine semi-structured interviews. Most notably, during two consecutive sessions of the workshop, the participants were asked to discuss and write on post-it notes what they associated with Cittaslow and frugal abundance, respectively. Because participant observation was only sparsely used, this chapter generally depicts the villagers' *analyses* of their values and practices rather than how they are enacted.

A diverse range of villagers in terms of gender, age and nationality took part in the research. The data was analysed following the guidance of Fletcher (2017) for critical realist research. It means that the results presented here have been subject to my own interpretations informed by degrowth-related scholarship (see also Fletcher 2020).

The next, second, section in this chapter delineates the essence of frugal abundance in the community. It also provides a summary of its broader meaning, which is then detailed in the third and fourth sections. The fifth section discusses a significant difference with how degrowth is generally conceived, while the sixth section concludes by arguing that the notion of frugal abundance and

the methodology presented in this chapter could help to build bridges between some communities and the degrowth movement.

Essence of frugal abundance in Djúpivogur

I argue that frugal abundance in Djúpivogur overall means swimming against the economic current. In practice, the community values and takes actions for what can be categorised as 'non-economic' ideas and practices, that is, those that primarily focus on social, cultural and environmental objectives. In contrast, economic ideas and practices include striving for profit, having a cost-benefit mindset and working to produce and consume more (Parrique 2020, p. 46; Latouche 2005, p. 226). Humans in this context behave like *homo economicus*, self-interested beings who ideally act to become more powerful economically and socially. Instead, numerous non-economic ideas and practices are valued in the village, and the rest of this chapter details many of them. They remind of the ecological economics analysis of the economy as *embedded* in social and ecological processes.

The most emblematic example of swimming against the economic current in Djúpivogur regards commercial signs. Since it joined the Cittaslow movement, almost all such signs have been removed, most notably a Coca-Cola sign which was in front of one of the two restaurants in the centre. This decision goes against economic common sense and, instead, aims to give space for cultural, social and environmental objectives in the village. It also conforms with the degrowth movement objections to advertising and to the supremacy of economic logic.

Other notable examples include preventing the construction of a car park in the centre, forcing tourist boats to stay in a second harbour outside of the town centre, as well as replacing plastic bags in the supermarket with some made out of recycled clothes by children at school in an effort not to use new resources and to promote craft making. These practical examples are mentioned with pride within the community. Nobody in Djúpivogur explicitly expressed the idea of swimming against the economic current. However, several villagers argued that the community is carrying out something different. The former mayor, Gauti Jóhannesson, said that 'the village is going one way', implying that others are going in another direction.

Moreover, the village is not 'radical' in the sense of rejecting everything that relates to the economy. Rather, the community aims to find a balance between economic and non-economic aspects of life in order to achieve a high quality of life. To illustrate, an interviewee argued:

> We have to go from profits, you know, revenues, money, economy – I mean, all that stuff – we have to put. . . . I mean, I'm not saying that we should not pay attention to it. But we should pay more attention to this human or people-related things than we are doing now. I mean, we have to get a balance.

Participants often invoked the idea of balance to reject projects and ideas seen as too focused on the economy. A workshop participant stated:

> We have to be the one[s] that say "okay, you are here in our community, in our environment. Yes [you provide] jobs, thank you, good. But you cannot do whatever you like". We have to make the balance. . . . We will not say yes to, say, an aluminium factory or to Coca-Cola if it makes profit.

Finding a balance between the economic and non-economic spheres of life is not easy, especially for a small village that is subject to pressures from more powerful outside agents. Consequently,

while Djúpivogur aims to favour non-economic ideas and practices, it is not always able to do so. Moreover, it does not aim to live outside of Icelandic society. It means that the village must find compromises, and with such compromises come conflicts and contradictions.

The local fish processing and aquaculture companies illustrate the tensions and contradictions in the village. Both companies are praised by some community members because they bring jobs and helped the village to economically recover from a recession that took place after a big fishing company left in 2014. However, some criticised these companies for causing pollution and large disruption to marine life, especially as one of them was planning to open a polystyrene packaging facility in the village at the time of the fieldwork. Going deeper into the conflicts in the community and how they are dealt with goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to keep in mind that Djúpivogur is not as uniform and frictionless as this chapter might otherwise convey.

During the fieldwork, it became clear that the villagers resonated with the term 'frugal abundance' and with the idea of being rich without much in the way of materials. In the following, I detail eight categories of values and practices which give substance to the overall meaning of frugal abundance in the community. These categories are: resonance; having time; grounding the future on some elements from the past; care for everything; resistance; questioning the good life as based on high material consumption; balancing individualism and collectivism; and, finally, humility.

Community members naturally built their understanding of frugal abundance on what they were familiar with, that is, their conception of Cittaslow. Therefore, the substantiated meaning of frugal abundance is firmly grounded in Cittaslow, and the first five categories of values and practices came directly from what they associated with Cittaslow during the research. In contrast, the last three categories arose from discussions around frugal abundance and are less practised in the village as part of Cittaslow. The following two sections detail these eight categories. Figure 17.1 schematically summarises the results. The diagram is purposively curvy because the Cittaslow philosophy is sometimes said to be 'curvy', in opposition to 'fast' straight lines (Sohn et al. 2015, p. 4).

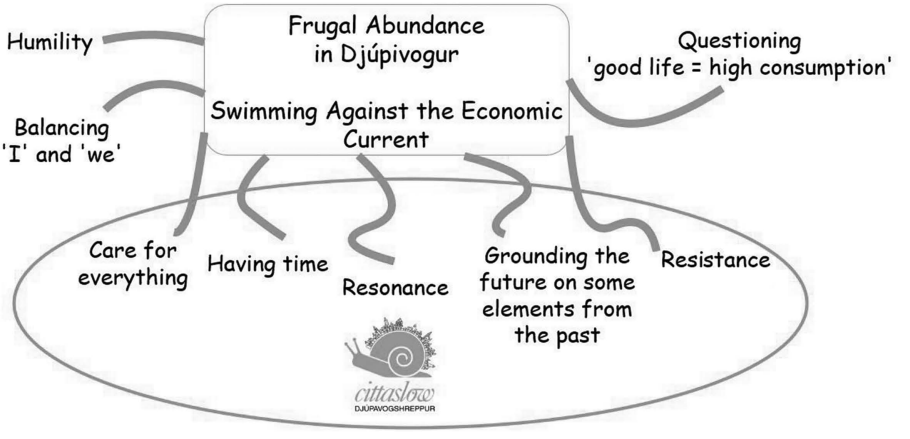

Figure 17.1 The meaning of frugal abundance in Djúpivogur – five elements in circle sourced from meanings of Cittaslow.

Substantiated meaning coming from Cittaslow

This section details the five categories of values and practices that emerged from discussions around Cittaslow but are also part of how the participants conceived frugal abundance.

Resonance

Djúpivogur community members consider deep and meaningful relationships to be of paramount importance. Participants in the workshop wrote on post-it notes that Cittaslow is about 'connection', 'networking' and aiming 'to live in rhythm with natural environment, community and neighbours'. The concept of resonance, theorised by the Frankfurt School scholar Hartmut Rosa, corresponds well with what the participants expressed, and has often been associated with degrowth, particularly in the German-speaking world (Schmelzer and Vetter 2019). Rosa (2018, pp. 46–7) defines resonance as a 'mode of relating to the world in which the subject feels touched, moved or addressed by the people, places, objects, etc. he or she encounters', and as the 'dual movement of af←fection (something touches us from the outside) and e→motion (we answer by giving a response and thus by establishing a connection)'. Resonance, therefore, causes strong emotions and changes the parties involved in the process. Moreover, it requires the encounter with an 'other' (Rosa 2023) and can take place with 'other people, artifacts, and natural objects, as well as perceived totalities such as nature, the universe, history, God, life, and even one's own body and emotions' (Rosa 2019, p. 288). Many spheres of resonance are practised and cherished in the village, and I address three important ones that are also relevant to degrowth (Sekulova et al. 2023), namely, resonance with other people, the village itself and the nature around.

Djúpivogur villagers highly value resonance with other people, particularly family members and other residents. An interviewee for example stated that 'being together' is 'so Cittaslow'. Another said:

> I realised how big social connections are in Cittaslow. . . . Growing up here, all these social events and everything that was happening, and we were all together, like grown-ups and kids and all people, everybody. And yeah, you can see it clearly in Cittaslow how it's just focused on social things.

Because social connections are very important, individuals exert energy to 'make things happen so that we can all come together', as an interviewee said. As a result, there are many occasions for locals to gather, socialise or celebrate.

The community members are also in resonance with the village as an entity. For instance, an interviewee claimed that 'people bond with the village'. A person involved in the planning of the built environment stressed that the objective is to a create 'place attachment' which 'gives people a great experience'. It is about fostering or maintaining a 'sense of place', that is, a shared meaning constructed 'as a result of the experiences and memories that [the residents] associate with a particular place' (Knox 2005, p. 2).

Nature is another sphere of resonance in the village. Workshop participants wrote on post-it notes that Cittaslow is about 'being part of, close to nature' or in 'connection with nature'. Several local environmental milieus, such as the black-sand beaches and the pyramid-shaped Búlandstindur

mountain, are talked about with passion. Two quotes from interviewees also provide evidence of resonance between villagers and local animals:

> For me, the fact that there are reindeers in my garden when I wake up in the morning, it makes me so happy. There is something so unbelievably good about that.

> Here in Djúpivogur, the birds would go in the winter, and when they come back in spring time, this is like, now all the depression and the darkness is going [away] because the birds are coming home. And we really embrace that.

Having time

'Time is the asset of here', an interviewee argued. The consensus in the village is that they gain two hours per day compared to elsewhere, particularly cities. This is a feeling rather than an actual temporal reality. It refers to the additional attention left after the workday due to the peaceful and relaxed atmosphere in the village, itself fostered by its closeness to nature and the absence of advertising signs.

Some community members associated Cittaslow in the village with 'having time to do the things that come naturally to each other' and 'enjoying simple things', such as being in nature, with family and friends, or just enjoying food. Instead of rushing these 'simple things', which are often devalued in the modern world, community members are keen to take the time needed to enjoy and appreciate them.

When individuals take the time to enjoy simple moments, life becomes anchored, structured by these events. This contrasts with what Serge Latouche (2020, p. 152) calls the 'flattening of time', in which 'time loses its "concreteness"' and 'becomes a homogeneous quantity which no longer has any connection with experience'. The flattening of time, Latouche argues, is due to the world being governed by the clock, because of which no moment has more value than any other. In this context, individuals feel disorientated, and life itself is transformed 'into an insubstantial slop' (p. 152), in which different moments in life just pass but have no flavour, no meaning. By attempting to prioritise simple events and taking the time to enjoy them, life in Djúpivogur remains partly structured by individual and collective events which are judged to be meaningful.

Taking the time to enjoy one's activities is related to awareness, here understood as being *conscious* in order to prioritise what matters. Indeed, one cannot appreciate an event if it is not thoroughly processed by the body and the mind – see, for instance, Bergson (2001 [1889]) for philosophical arguments linking time and awareness. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Djúpivogur residents value awareness and associate it with Cittaslow.

Awareness here refers not only to individual 'mindfulness' but also to an increased collective understanding that helps the community to make informed decisions. There is a sense that everyone should be involved and have a voice, which takes time:

> I think that is very important in Cittaslow that you make a time to think: "Is this really the best way to make life better?", "Is the path that we are on now really the best path?". . . . And it takes time, because then, of course, everybody has to have a voice, and we have to figure out a way together. . . . You have to make these things together. And it takes time, you have to figure out how you are going to do it. So. . . . we do it slowly.

Grounding the future on some elements from the past

Muñoz-Sueiro and Kallis (2024) introduce the notion of 'post-figuration' for degrowth. Grounded in Gramscian thought, post-figuration refers to 'bringing inspiring elements from the past to the present imagination of desirable futures' (Muñoz-Sueiro and Kallis 2024, p. 966). They explain that, in some cultures, elements of the traditional popular culture are an inspiration to build a better and more emancipatory future. These elements, in turn, could 'open possibilities towards imagining and enacting alternative post-capitalist, degrowth futures' (Muñoz-Sueiro and Kallis 2024, p. 952). All societies rely on their past in one way or another, but the Western capitalist culture sees the past as backwards. It is based on 'creative destruction' (Robra et al. 2023) and stabilises itself through change (Rosa and Henning 2018). Instead, Muñoz-Sueiro and Kallis refer to cultures that ground their future on some elements of the past relevant to the present and the future. These elements should be selected so that they favour emancipation, prevent co-optation and avoid being reactionary.

This depiction applies well to the case of Djúpivogur. On the one hand, the inhabitants generally cherish the past and the rich local history. They attempt to conserve their past and, as one interviewee claimed, 'we are always trying to tell the future in our past'. Conservation of old buildings is important, and many of them have been refurbished to their original appearance. Moreover, older people are respected, and many community members value the transmission of their knowledge. One interviewee claimed that older generations were very environmental because they 'had to make everything themselves' and had to 'really use everything they had in a really good way'. It is worth mentioning, even if it is not an isolated case, that the Icelandic ways of life prior to modernisation processes – which started in the late 19th century – seem to have had much in common with degrowth ideals (Morris 1887, 1950 [1883], p. 187).

The villagers associate the conservation of the past with Cittaslow. Some workshop participants wrote that Cittaslow means 'history', to 'be sustainable like people were in the past', to 'come back to the past for a clean world' and to 'bring up the good old stories, wisdom, way of life'.

On the other hand, the past is not idealised, so that the village only wants to conserve some of its elements. Several workshop participants mentioned that the past was not perfect and that it cannot serve as a blueprint for the future. Someone wrote that Cittaslow is about building 'a way of life in accordance with "new" values, a way to be discovered', 'a new tradition', 'a new saga' (saga means 'story' or 'history' in Icelandic).

Djúpivogur is, therefore, selective in what it values and wants to conserve from the past, and this selection generally aims at achieving higher quality of life and at protecting the local environment. Furthermore, the community only endorses elements from modern times if they are conceived as improvements to quality of life. For instance, the village recently took part in a university-funded project involving virtual reality to increase participation in local decision-making.

Relatedly, Djúpivogur is proud and cherishes its local culture. This is a common feature among Cittaslow towns. They focus on what differentiates them from others to build their own identity (Mayer and Knox 2006; Pink and Servon 2013). The preservation and updating of elements such as traditional craft, cuisine, architecture and celebrations are linked to the idea of honouring what makes the community special, of 'honoring uniqueness' (Visit Austerland 2023) without ostracising the rest.

Care for everything

During the workshop, participants wrote that in the village Cittaslow means to 'care for', 'to be kind', and to show 'respect', 'tolerance', 'trust', 'sincerity', 'reciprocity', 'helpfulness', 'sharing',

'cohesiveness', 'social responsibility', 'diversity' and 'open communication'. All these terms relate to the ethics of care as theorised by feminist scholars such as Tronto (2005) and The Care Collective (2020), even though reproductive work is still mostly carried out by women in the village. Care in this sense not only refers to looking after the physical and emotional needs of others but also to the 'social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life' (The Care Collective 2020, p. 4). On a holistic care economy and degrowth, see Lilian Pungas and Jana Gebauer (Chapter 20, this volume). Djúpivogur community members emphasised that caring practices are carried out not only towards friends and family but also towards 'everyone' and 'everything'. The categories explicitly mentioned include non-Icelandic residents, tourists, objects, nature, the local history and buildings as well the LGBTQ+ community. In this part, I focus on the first three.

Non-Icelandic residents account for around a quarter of the village population, coming mostly from Poland. Icelandic residents argued that they treat non-Icelandic newcomers as guests, which translates into efforts to make them feel welcome in the village. 'Tolerance', 'diversity' and 'cohesiveness' were mentioned as key for Cittaslow in the village. Indeed, the non-Icelandic residents that I talked to said that they felt welcome in the village. A concrete example of efforts towards non-Icelandic residents is that all fish factory workers are employed all year long, instead of the usual seasonal contracts in this industry elsewhere in Iceland. Also, many Icelandic language lessons are given to facilitate the integration of non-Icelanders. Some community members were even designing a software application to learn Icelandic for common circumstances in Djúpivogur, such as being in the supermarket or the school. The situation regarding non-Icelanders is not perfect, however, as some workshop participants reported cases of discrimination.

Hospitality is a key element in Djúpivogur, as in other Cittaslow towns (Miele 2008, p. 139). Tourists are said to be treated as guests, and community members carry out efforts in this direction. They want to create genuine connections with them, based on mutually respecting each other.

Finally, villagers associate 'use things well', 'reuse', 'enhance' and 'repair' with Cittaslow. In other words, they care for objects. Residents 'like to use things as long as it is possible', as one interviewee put it. If something cannot be repaired, then recycling options are considered. An emblematic example concerns cement pillars which had been left on the shore next to the village by the big fishing company that left in 2014. They were converted into an art piece by adding granite representations of the eggs of birds which are present in the area.

Resistance

Nobody directly associated Djúpivogur with any forms of resistance. However, several interviewees considered resistance as 'a response' or 'in contrast' to 'globalisation', 'economic growth', 'the market' and the 'age of industry'. Moreover, through their actions and values, Djúpivogur inhabitants practise some sort of resistance against the supremacy of economic logics, which ties well with how resistance is perceived in degrowth (Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. 67–9).

Importantly, being part of Cittaslow in Iceland is in itself an act of resistance and contestation. Indeed, Iceland is one of the most capitalistic countries on Earth, where 'materialistic madness' (Önnudóttir et al. 2022, p. 6) and conspicuous consumption (Mixa 2009) reign supreme. The anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019) even convincingly contends that the Icelandic national identity is deeply rooted in modernity. In fact, McDonald's is an emblematic symbol associated with the Icelandic culture. Icelanders widely acclaimed the arrival of the fast-food chain in the 1990s (Loftsdóttir 2019, pp. 64–73) and, when all three branches closed in the aftermath of the

2008 financial crisis, it brought sadness and anxiety in the country. A third of the population visited one of the branches during their last week, as reported by Loftsdóttir (2019, pp. 115–23).

In contrast, Djúpivogur is part of a movement that is overtly against McDonald's and the 'McDonaldisation of society' (Ritzer 2004). In fact, the Slow Food movement started after a demonstration against the establishment of a McDonald's branch in the historical centre of Rome. This story, which can be found on Djúpivogur's website (Visit Austerland 2023), shows that the village symbolically resists the national Icelandic identity that emerged in the 20th century through the modernisation process.

Resistance in Djúpivogur can be called 'indirect activism', as Pink (2009, p. 455) names it. Indeed, it does not focus on direct confrontation with social structures. Instead, residents demonstrate by example that another way is possible and, by doing so, question the current social reality. This resistance is also pragmatic because it involves what Latouche (2020, p. 120) calls 'the necessary compromises of action', which puts it in constant risk of co-optation. In practice, initiatives in Djúpivogur, as in other Cittaslow towns, are sometimes supported by big corporations and state institutions. However, it is mostly to 'exploit' opportunities arising from the latter towards the realisation of the former (Servon and Pink 2015; Mayer and Knox 2010).

An example of this indirect and pragmatic resistance in Djúpivogur can be found in the tourist industry. In the late 2010s, a tourist company wanted its cruise ships to stopover in the village. The community members involved in the negotiations would only accept the stopovers if several conditions were to be fulfilled and would bring benefits to the community from their perspective – resisting dominant practices centred on economic objectives of the cruise ship industry. These conditions included tourists being supervised by tour guides and walking mostly outside of the village centre in order to limit disturbance to residents. Villagers also requested the operation to benefit the local economy by solely employing locals, in contrast to usual practices in the tourism industry in Iceland. They asked for the tour to highlight the local history and culture instead of more 'touristic' or 'shiny' aspects of the town so that locals would feel valued for their culture. Through this agreement, the village shows that tourism can exist in non-mainstream forms, and provide resources – through harbour taxes – to the municipality to foster other meaningful projects.

Substantiated meaning coming from discussions around frugal abundance

Discussions around Cittaslow and frugal abundance had several commonalities, but the latter enabled three additional topics to emerge or to become more prominent. They form the last three categories of values and practices which are part of the substantiated meaning of frugal abundance in Djúpivogur.

Questioning the good life as based on high material consumption

Crucial terms for frugal abundance are 'needs', 'desires', 'enough', 'consumption', 'wealth' and 'the good life' – concepts already touched upon in discussions about Cittaslow. For instance, an interviewee contended that 'Cittaslow is trying to get us back to basics even though it is not easy'. However, raising the notion of frugal abundance prompted more explicit reflections.

Many such reflections revolved around needs and the idea of enough. To illustrate, some workshop participants wrote that frugal abundance means 'to need no more than the environment can sustainably provide you', 'to have no more than what you need' and 'to be conscious of yourself and the needs of [those] who are around [you]'.

Some villagers directly related frugal abundance to the good life, for instance when they wrote that it means 'simplicity is happiness' and 'happy sufficiency'. By doing so, these participants questioned and criticised the dominant vision of the good life as associated with high levels of consumption. This questioning is, according to one interviewee, a reason to be attracted by the Cittaslow movement:

> We have figured out that all this 'making things and buying', it's actually not something that gives us what we are looking for. So somehow we know that. So we have gone more into mindfulness, we have gone more into the Slow movement, and Cittaslow is a part of that. . . . It's related to our consumption, really. And what we believe is welfare, to have enough.

Relatedly, some villagers questioned the usual meaning of wealth. For example, a workshop participant wrote this quote from the Stoic philosopher Epictetus on a post-it note: 'Wealth is not the possession of many objects, but to have few desires'. An interviewee also reflected upon the meaning of wealth with respect to a recent situation in their family; their mum recently said that their family was poor when the interviewee was growing up. The interviewee disagreed and, instead, started to frame another vision of what it means to be rich:

> I had this conversation, and she used the word 'poor' and I was like "What? I'm not sure that we were, because we didn't need anything else." I think that maybe [she now thinks this way] because there was not money to buy. . . . But, were we poor? Maybe we didn't [need to] to buy these things. . . . Why are we [now] buying all of these things that we don't need? I remember my mum, she used to make our clothes. We didn't go to Reykjavík and buy it. But we had clothes, and very nice ones because she was very good at it. Of course, there was fish six days during the week [but] this is good, you can cook it in many ways.

Humility

Some villagers associated frugal abundance with being 'humble'. They saw the display of wealth and power as influencing others in their consumption and in what they considered to be needs and desires. Therefore, being humble helped to keep them at a lower level. Some residents expressed discomfort when others showed off what they considered as luxury, and an interviewee said that living in Reykjavík was not for them because many were displaying their big cars, big houses and so on there.

In addition, some workshop participants wrote that frugal abundance means being 'content', being 'happy with what you have' and having 'courage'. I consider this as another form of humility – being okay even if it involves some constraints, efforts or suffering. Frugal abundance as humility is about feeling okay, not always having all available comforts (Boni 2022) and everything that one seemingly desires. This is related to self-restraint, which was one of the most widespread values in Iceland prior to the modernisation process (Morris 1887).

Balancing individualism and collectivism

Some community members expressed frugal abundance as ultimately a question of values and mindset, and these are seen as personal matters in Iceland and, increasingly, in the village. This

is a common feature of late modernity, in which questioning each other's visions of the good is avoided and considered unethical (Rosa 2018, pp. 41–2). Therefore, as an interviewee said, 'it is very hard to talk about it [frugal abundance], because my next-door neighbour could be thinking differently'. This led to further reflections on the relative importance of the 'I' and the 'we' among some participants.

Measurements based on surveys show that Iceland is one of the most individualistic countries on earth – competing with the United States – because ties between individuals are loose and individuals are focused on themselves (Mixa and Vaiman 2015). Discussions about frugal abundance generated debates and criticisms of individualism. For instance, a workshop participant lamented on the fact that 'it is always "I"', that 'now, you have rights for everything' and that 'we are used to make things for ourselves and then the community', implying that a sense of community cannot be built in this individualistic context. Participants stressed that individualism was less present in the past, and that those in the 'older generation' in the village know that they 'have some obligations'. As a result of such discussions, some participants argued that it is important to find a 'balance between "I" and "we"'.

Lack of emphasis on social justice

The meaning of frugal abundance presented by this research case has strong ties with degrowth. The major difference concerns the lack of emphasis on (global) social justice. Injustices and inequalities were part of discussions around Cittaslow and frugal abundance, but they mostly focused on residents in Djúpivogur or in Iceland. In other words, local social justice is present but not so much global social justice. The community is generally quite self-centred. When it is not focused on the individual, it generally concentrates on the village or on Iceland. The rest of the world, and most notably the Global South, is often overlooked.

This is partly due to the fact that the Cittaslow movement seldom emphasises social justice. When it is mentioned, for instance in the *Cittaslow Brochure* (CI 2019, p. 6) and the *Cittaslow Charter* (CI 2023, p. 2), it mostly concerns issues within the communities involved in the movement – which are predominantly European, rural and white. This has sometimes resulted in tensions between the Cittaslow and degrowth movements. To illustrate, Islar and Gulbandilar (2019) criticise the idea that Cittaslow represents degrowth in practice in a Turkish Cittaslow town because it was not used to tackle social injustices in the area.

Concluding reflections

This chapter delineated the meaning of frugal abundance in a community that was willing to engage with it. The results show that Djúpivogur has strong alignments with degrowth principles even if the community is not aware of, and does not advocate for, degrowth. It can be considered as a case of 'real-existing degrowth', that is, an imperfect and incomplete alternative to the hegemony of growth (Kallis et al. 2022, p. 2; Marula Tsagkari et al. Chapter 10, this volume). Therefore, the chapter highlights one way of practising degrowth in the current world.

Beyond these results, the method applied in Djúpivogur provides a potential pathway to build bridges between communities and the degrowth movement. Degrowth advocates such as Ashish Kothari (2024) have made a compelling case that degrowth must not replace existing concepts and practices within the global tapestry of alternatives, of which Djúpivogur's conception and practice of Cittaslow could be a part. However, *some communities* – even if not all – embracing such alternatives might find the concept of frugal abundance empowering rather than imposing. The notion

of frugal abundance might also be an attractive and useful starting point for conversations around degrowth in communities and with individuals who do not yet endorse a clear alternative. As such, the expression 'frugal abundance' might be a way to empower people in their struggles to build just and desirable futures within the limits of the planet.

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DEFINING DEFASHION
A manifesto for degrowth

Sandra Niessen

'Defashion' is a neologism

The word 'defashion' has been adopted by Fashion Act Now to convey the nature of the paradigmatic shift that urgently needs to happen in order to achieve sustainability in the domain of clothing and bodily adornment.[1]

'Fashion' is not only a problematic industry, given its ecological footprint and harmful emissions (including not just CO_2 but also other poisons, microfibres and waste in general). The concept of 'fashion' is also a challenging one to negotiate. The Merriam-Webster (undated) online dictionary defines 'fashion' generically as 'a distinctive or peculiar and often habitual manner or way'. In other words, the term has universal application. However, the culture of big fashion has redirected the term for the exclusive use of a specific dress tradition that dominates in the globalised economy, characterised by growth and the accumulation of wealth at the top of the production chain. 'Defashion', both a word and a way, calls out this co-optation to bring back the universal phenomenon, the global pluriverse of clothing and bodily adornment.

Defashion: dismantling a system failing to meet needs of people, cultures and planet

The fashion industry is failing to take account of its harmful impacts on the planet (Kent 2021). The reports of the science-based Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2024) commissioned by the United Nations reveal the extent of the damage that has been done to the biosphere of planet Earth and, indirectly, the incapacities of governments to deal with the resulting global ecological emergency. Defashion is a response to the egregious failures of both. The activist group, Fashion Act Now, calls for defashion to dismantle the globalised, industrial fashion system as quickly as possible for the sake of the well-being of planetary systems and inhabitants.

Defashion is degrowth in the fashion industry

The fashion industry operates within an economy the health of which is measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), a standardised, reductionist tool devised to track the relative progress of

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nations numerically (Sachs 2019, p. xiv). This measurement focus is fundamentally problematic because the primary objective of the industry is shifted away from the clothing needs of people and planetary boundaries, and towards competing within the economic system. Growth operates unfairly in the interests of the global core, while the burden of the impacts are borne especially in the global periphery. The growth imperative is, in itself, an expression of coloniality inherent in the system of fashion. In the current period of excessive clothing production and waste, the industry continues to be dysfunctionally oriented towards further expansion (Research and Markets 2021). 'Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being', writes Hickel (2020, p. 204). Defashion echoes the Fletcher and Tham (2019, p. 14) estimate of a needed reduction of between 75 and 95 per cent of the materials and energy use in the industrial fashion system. While degrowth is emerging as a theme of discussion within the industry, even micro-enterprises and craft-based businesses continue to operate in terms of the growth imperative. Defashion meets the needs of people, not a destructive, colonial economic system.

Defashion implies a paradigmatic shift

Sustainability will not be found in a narrow focus on the physical materials and processes of fashion production. At best, what crowds under the umbrellas of 'sustainable/green fashion' and 'circular economy' will result in greater efficiencies in material and energy use, but greater efficiencies may drive further growth, as benefits are invested in industry expansion (the Jevons paradox). To deal solely with the material aspects of fashion is insufficient; it is tinkering at the fringes of the system while deflecting collective attention away from the core of the problem and enabling business as usual. The conventional strategies for sustainability within the capitalist framework of continued growth have been described as pathological refusal to become sustainable (Fournier 2008). Sustainability requires systemic change rooted in plurality. The implications of the term 'defashion' are so all-encompassing as to constitute the entire iceberg of which material and energy reduction is but the tip. The term 'degrowth' is commonly, but erroneously, understood to refer to only this tip.

Reducing throughputs of energy and material is more challenging than it may seem at first glance because, as Hickel (2020, p. 205) has pointed out:

> Degrowth . . . is about shifting to a different kind of economy altogether – an economy that doesn't need growth in the first place. An economy that's organised around human flourishing and ecological stability, rather than around the constant accumulation of capital.

This is central to the paradigmatic shift that is implied by the term 'defashion'. Like degrowth, defashion rejects GDP, the prevailing measure of economic growth, because it fails to take well-being into account. Defashion is either the delinking of big fashion from this dysfunctional economic system or the obsolescence of that economic system in which fashion is rooted. Either way, defashion could serve as a Trojan Horse because it has the potential to trigger yet more extensive change to restore the planet.

Defashion is deep decolonisation

Defashion calls for the obsolescence of clothing systems based on extraction and exploitation. Colonial hierarchies of exploitation and erasure are a *sine qua non* of the fashion industry, held

over since its colonial beginnings (Niessen 2010). Defashion calls for the elimination of all 'sacrifice zones' both directly and indirectly related to big fashion. These zones are the result of capitalist extraction and exploitation. They constitute profound denial of the value of the lives and cultures of others. Significantly, indigenous cultures and their clothing systems continue to be severely eroded by the big fashion system. Defashion expands the definition of 'sacrifice zones' to acknowledge the full range of violence and destruction perpetrated by the fashion industry, including to psychic well-being and cultural health (Niessen 2020). Defashion calls for respect, caring and the right to self-determination of all cultures to replace greed, growth and cultural erasure. Importantly, erasures of alternative conceptions of time, space and meaning diminish the opportunities to craft alternatives to the current big fashion phenomenon. The processes of cultural erasure sacrifice our collective future to ongoing coloniality.

Defashion facilitates a clothing pluriverse as an outcome of fashion decolonisation

Defashion is about taking back our clothing, about freeing creativity and production processes from the hegemony of the top-down, globalised, industrial fashion system. This is not a process of deprivation but a joyful process of community and individual empowerment in the re-emergence of local caring for local talents and environments. It has the potential to restore what fashion has sacrificed.

Defashion is a shift away from the current homogenised global fashion system towards a clothing pluriverse: a multiplicity of clothing systems, constructed for and by specific cultural and physical environments (Kothari et al. 2019, p. xxviii). In the first place, this involves acknowledgement that clothing systems around the world have been wrongfully harmed and erased by the big fashion system. The ethical implications and obligations of such acknowledgement are considerable as erasure must cease and the harm caused by erasure redressed. Defashion recognises that fashion justice and fashion decolonisation must go far deeper than just better pay for garment workers, and representation of BIPOC in the industry, both of which operate within the big fashion idiom and allow for business as usual. Cultural survival, mention of which is largely absent in conventional strategies for sustainability, needs to become central.

Defashion operates through clothing commons

Defashion supports the invention of alternative clothing systems. It proposes clothing commons as alternatives for the big fashion system. Commons are strategies of managing resources collectively. If the big fashion system is top-down and designed for the accumulation of monetary wealth for the very few at the expense of the many, commons constitute bottom-up systems of endless diversity, self-organised and maintained by participants (Bollier 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Commons offer latitude for experimentation, revisioning and growth tailored to local needs and circumstances. Commons encourage the (re-)emergence of a range of values (other than monetary) and store this wealth of alternative values diffusely in the relational webs that are nurtured among producers and wearers. Degrowth is built into the functioning of a commons because the diverse benefits are funnelled back for the well-being of the entire community; benefits are not accrued at the top of dysfunctional hierarchies for the benefit of the few. If the big fashion system reorients other clothing systems for dependence on industry and the accumulation of capital (fashionisation), the commons reverse this process and facilitate the diversity of the clothing pluriverse.

Defashion puts well-being and the earth first

Defashion is about placing the carrying capacity of the planet in an incontrovertibly central position (Fletcher and Tham 2019). This means replacing the fashion industry with alternatives that have well-being at their core (see, for instance, WEAll 2024). By aiming for clothing systems that are restorative, defashion goes a step beyond aspiring to stay within the earth's carrying capacity. By implication, defashion is about recognising the inextricable connectedness of all things and beings and acknowledging this connectedness as a greater good. Defashion humbles and fills with gratitude.

Defashion is, therefore, fundamentally about debunking the myths, illusions and values through which the fashion industry maintains itself. It explodes big fashion's promulgated fictions and fantasies that seduce consumers into literally and spiritually 'buying in' to the system, regardless of its true costs. It reveals fashion's self-serving strategies. With the hollow dreams laid bare, most fashion items are exposed as disposable commodities that will likely sooner, rather than later, be added to obscenely large heaps of toxic clothing waste.

Spread the word! Defashion now!

Fashion is a socially constructed system. This means that it can (only) be dismantled collectively. The onus is on us all. Fashion Act Now aspires to the concept of defashion being picked up and enacted in every corner of the globe by the vigorous workings of fashion commons. May the concept engender profound paradigmatic change and radical, restorative action. May it fulfil our collective longing to have clothing that is not complicit in the destruction of our planetary home.

Note

1 The term was launched during Fashion Act Now's online presentation entitled, 'Defashion: A strategy for radical care of people and planet' in the Ways of Caring/Practicing Solidarity International Fashion Conference, State of Fashion Biennale, 30 June 2022 (FAN 2022). 'Activists demanding and enabling a radical defashion future' is the self-descriptor for Fashion Act Now (FAN 2024). As further detailed in the acknowledgements, this chapter is a revised and updated version of the author-accepted manuscript for Niessen, S 2022, 'Defining defashion: A manifesto for degrowth', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 439–44, https://doi.org/10.1386/infs_00082_7

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DEGROWTH
Health and healthcare

Martin Hensher and Jean-Louis Aillon

Introduction

Adequate health is an essential component of any conception of human well-being. Premature death is an obvious 'bad' that cuts short an individual's ability to realise their potential or to exercise their capabilities to lead a good life. Avoidable illness not only tends to reduce life expectancy but also causes pain, suffering and loss of function, which can impede many other aspects of human activity and well-being. Yet, however hard we strive to lead a 'healthy' life, we will all die; we will all experience illness and injury at some points in our lives; almost all of us will care for a loved one who is ill or dying; and the vast majority of us will experience some significant degree of illness and loss of functional capacity as we age and approach death.

Healing, healers and caring have, therefore, been with us since the earliest days of human evolution (Spikins et al. 2010). Physicians (as opposed to traditional or faith healers) certainly date back to Ancient Greece, and characteristic healthcare institutions such as hospitals emerged in the early Christian era (Risse 1999). Yet modern healthcare is a product of the era of unrestrained economic growth. In the United States (US), medical spending accounted for around 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 1800, and kept pace with overall economic growth, accounting for 2.5 per cent of GDP by 1900 (Catillon et al. 2018). Yet by 2016 US healthcare expenditure had exceeded 17 per cent of US GDP – an enormous absolute and relative growth in the size of the healthcare sector. While the US healthcare system is unique in the sheer scale of its spending, a similar trend of rapid growth in spending as a share of GDP has been seen in all other high-income countries, which typically allocate around 10 per cent of GDP to healthcare (Hensher et al. 2020b).

Good health and healthcare are essential foundations for any society which seeks to secure high levels of human well-being. They are of great significance to any discussion of degrowth futures, and a small but expanding literature has attempted to address their potential relationship with degrowth (e.g. Borowy and Aillon 2017; Aillon and D'Alisa 2020; Hensher 2020a; Hensher and Zywert 2020; Zywert and Quilley 2018). Health and healthcare are also important exemplars of the dilemmas and challenges posed by degrowth. For example, there is enormous potential for improved health through reducing harmful overconsumption, both in the wider 'consumptagenic' society (Friel 2020) and by reducing the often harmful overuse of healthcare itself (Hensher et al. 2020a). Yet it remains far from clear that the many benefits of modern healthcare can be fully

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sustained in an economy subject to rapid de-complexification, whether under an involuntary 'great simplification' (Hagens 2020; Bonaiuti 2018), or under more deliberate processes of degrowth (Hensher 2023; Zywert and Quilley 2018).

This chapter seeks to review current thinking on the challenges and opportunities for health and healthcare inherent in degrowth futures. It reviews the current literature through the lenses of both 'voluntary', planned, degrowth and of protracted recession or collapse. Voluntary, planned, democratic, fair and convivial degrowth encompasses both utopian perspectives of degrowth as a desirable end in itself, delivering a new society of unambiguously improved human well-being, and more pragmatic perspectives which see degrowth as a necessary process containing both benefits and very real costs and sacrifices, but without which a sustainable and survivable post-growth future cannot be realised. Extended recession or collapse, by contrast, is an unambiguously negative scenario in which contraction occurs as a consequence of both ecological and human factors.

Prelapsarian and techno-optimist myths

Discussions for and against degrowth sometimes call upon two caricatures where health is concerned. Some utopians appeal to an Edenic world of palaeolithic hunter-gatherers, in which – as long as the apex predators didn't eat you – humans lived natural, healthy lives, until the Fall and Faustian bargains of the agricultural and then the industrial revolutions respectively impoverished us physically and mentally. Progress enthusiasts appeal to an unbending arc of human health improvement, in which life expectancy can only ever increase with ever-enhanced technology, until the frailties of our human flesh can be overcome once and for all with transhumanist technologies. Both are equally without foundation and equally unhelpful in planning for the real challenges facing humanity.

Concerns over the negative impacts on health of economic growth and modernity can be traced back to the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. The available data on various measures of health status suggest real declines in life expectancy and physical stature, due to poor nutrition and unsanitary living conditions, for many decades following the agricultural enclosures of the 17th and 18th centuries, and at the beginning of urban migration in the early phase of the industrial era in Britain. Yet, from the mid-19th century and accelerating through the 20th century, population health began an unambiguous improvement in Britain, driven initially by sanitation and public health measures, better nutrition, education and prosperity, and later by medical technologies such as vaccination, antiseptic methods, anaesthesia and eventually antibiotics (Hensher 2020b).

This improvement spread out globally, first among the industrialising nations of Europe and North America, and then – at a very uneven pace – into what would now be described as the Global South. These improvements had profound impacts on population structures and patterns of illness. Measures to control infectious and communicable diseases achieved dramatic reductions in infant and childhood mortality – and with increasing confidence that their children would survive (even before widespread availability of modern contraceptives), parents decreased the number of children they chose to have, leading to a *demographic transition*. Somewhat later, this same success in reducing infectious diseases led also to an *epidemiological transition.* Infectious diseases (especially tuberculosis) ceased to be leading causes of death, and people lived longer but – in the process – developed chronic or non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, Alzheimer's and so on (Hensher 2020b). Yet even as these non-communicable diseases affect more and more people across the globe, better population access to healthcare and new health technologies have broadly improved individual survival prospects and outcomes for those

diagnosed with them – although inequalities in access to effective care remain substantial (Murray et al. 2015). There is little in the real data on human health trends over the past few centuries to support paleo-utopian nostalgia for a prelapsarian past.

Yet there are also strong grounds on which to reject the claims of endless progress made by the techno-optimists. Global life expectancy has indeed steadily improved between 1990 and 2019 (Naghavi et al. 2024). In the decade before the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it became clear that long-standing trends in mortality improvements and life expectancy gains had started to falter or even reverse in several high-income countries (Fenton et al. 2019; Ho and Hendi 2018). This was most dramatically visible in the US, where life expectancy fell for several consecutive years during the 2010s, driven in part by what Case and Deaton (2017) dubbed 'deaths of despair' – rising deaths in mid-life due primarily to opioid misuse, alcohol and suicide. Stalling progress in life expectancy trends in many other high-income nations has increasingly been connected with austerity policies in the decade following the global financial crisis (McCartney et al. 2020). Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a substantial loss of life expectancy – a global loss of 1.6 years of life expectancy between 2019 and 2021 (Naghavi et al. 2024). This pandemic loss is likely to represent a one-off reduction, but it is not yet clear whether the 'faltering' of the pre-pandemic period will also be left behind.

Another clear global trend which has not shown any reversal over the past three decades has been a steadily growing global mental health crisis. Since 1990, an ever-increasing share of total global disease burden has been due to mental and substance abuse disorders across countries at all income levels (Patel et al. 2018). Growing concerns over high and rising prevalence of mental distress and illness amongst children and adolescents became even more urgent as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Racine et al. 2021).

It has long been understood that illness is mediated via strong *social determinants*: most diseases impact more severely and frequently in groups and communities who are socially and/or economically disadvantaged, leading to significant health inequity (Commission on Social Determinants of Health 2008). These social determinants include income and wealth, food, housing, sanitation, education, gender inequity, political autonomy or marginalisation, racial inequalities and racism itself, and other structural factors.

In more recent years, there has also been a growing focus on the *commercial* determinants of health, defined as 'strategies and approaches used by the private sector to promote products and choices that are detrimental to health' (Kickbusch et al. 2016). An obvious example of this has been the enormous damage to health caused by tobacco over several generations in the 20th century, and the ongoing fight by the tobacco industry to continue to market its health-destroying products. Yet an enormous array of products can be shown to be harmful to health, from obvious culprits such as cheap alcohol, fast foods and sugary snacks and beverages through to growing concerns on the direct harms of online gambling, pornography, and social media on mental health and well-being – which urgently require fundamental and thorough-going changes to economic and regulatory models if they are to be reined in (Friel et al. 2023; Freudenberg 2014). These commercial determinants of health are intimately bound up with a growth model that effectively requires overconsumption, and which harms consumers, society and nature alike even as profits and GDP expand (Hensher et al. 2020a).

Finally, there is good reason to be concerned that human health is coming under increasing pressure from *environmental* determinants. While there have been great successes in reducing deaths from 'traditional' forms of pollution (such as indoor air pollution from cooking sources and unsafe water), deaths from 'modern' forms of pollution (including ambient air pollution, chemical

pollution, lead and occupational particulate matter) have increased significantly in the past 20 years (Fuller et al. 2022). As a matter of fact, Landrigan et al. (2018) point out that:

> diseases caused by pollution were responsible for an estimated 9 million premature deaths in 2015 – 16% of all deaths worldwide – three times more deaths than from AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria combined and 15 times more than from all wars and other forms of violence.

Concerns are growing rather than abating over the likely developmental neurotoxicity, reproductive toxicity and immunotoxicity of many widely used and often-persistent manufactured chemical compounds and pollutants increasingly found in the environment (Fuller et al. 2022; Marfella et al. 2024). Meanwhile, the negative impacts of climate change on human health (propagated through many different pathways) – which will be the major threat for human health in the 21st century (Costello et al. 2009) – are now not only increasingly well understood but also increasingly visible as climate impacts accelerate (Romanello et al. 2023).

There are, therefore, strong grounds for believing that planned degrowth offers important opportunities to improve human physical health and reduce healthcare needs.

Planned degrowth

The growing evidence of health-damaging overconsumption driven by the commercial determinants of health is, perhaps, the most obvious location for significant health benefits from a degrowth societal and economic model; simply squeezing out these harmful products, replacing them with healthy alternatives where they are needed (for instance, healthy foods or drinks instead of sweetened or ultra-processed products; community sport and social activities instead of gambling) or eliminating some others (such as tobacco and vaping). Even where not driven by malign commercial determinants, a societal shift to lower consumption levels would likely yield many other health benefits, for example reducing overall sugar and meat intake, and more physical activity due to reduced car use and greater use of public/active transport along with fewer traffic accidents.

It is, therefore, reasonable to anticipate that, over time, a degrowth transition would lead to reductions in the incidence of new-onset obesity, diabetes and hypertension. In turn, this would lead to subsequent reductions in the burden of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, renal failure and other outcomes related to cardiovascular risk – ischaemic heart disease and stroke having remained the first- and second-leading causes of age-standardised death globally for 30 years (Naghavi et al. 2024). It is possible that the same pathways might deliver some reductions in disease burden due to certain cancers, although the likely scale of such effects is more contestable. A degrowth transition that successfully reduces/eliminates fossil fuel use is also likely to deliver a wide range of health benefits due to reduced air pollution, through preventing cardiovascular diseases, respiratory illnesses (especially chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma) and lung cancer.

Empirically, the experience of successfully protecting population health outcomes in Cuba during the Special Economic Period (Borowy 2013) and in Japan during the long economic stagnation from 1990 (Hiyoshi et al. 2023) suggests that degrowth and post-growth scenarios certainly need not entail poorer health outcomes. While not the same thing as degrowth, evidence also exists to suggest that declining GDP does not automatically entail declining health (De Vogli and Owusu 2015). European evidence suggests that, by themselves, economic recessions and increasing unemployment have not historically been associated with higher overall mortality rates, although

they are associated with suicide and violent deaths (Stuckler et al. 2009), and that trend rates in mortality reduction may even have improved at the time of the 2007–2009 Great Recession (Tapia Granados and Ionides 2017). Indeed, those countries which did experience poorer health outcome trends during this period were those which had pursued policies of fiscal austerity and reductions in social protections (Karanikolos et al. 2013).

The most likely area in which a degrowth transition might engender countervailing negative physical health outcomes lies in occupational health and workplace injuries. Some visions of degrowth anticipate a significant shift of labour back towards historically labour-intensive approaches to industries and activities (such as agriculture and construction) which today are heavily mechanised. Many more people having to undertake harder physical labour will, other things being equal, increase the prevalence of agricultural and workplace accidents, injuries, and longer-term musculoskeletal conditions and resulting disability, even as increased physical activity brings other health benefits. Some of this risk can be mitigated by safe agroecological techniques and convivial machinery design, but it would be naïve to pretend it would not exist.

A degrowth transition also offers very substantial opportunities to achieve positive health outcomes via improved environmental determinants of health. A degrowth pathway to minimising future fossil fuel use probably offers the most rapid and direct approach to minimising the future health harms of climate change. Degrowth also reduces the likely pollution and health harms associated with the renewables transition – the health impacts of processes of minerals extraction, plastics and battery production, waste disposal and so on – relative to 'green growth' models, by the simple expedient of limiting the scale of future energy infrastructure and consumption to that required to meet basic needs (Vogel and Hickel 2023).

Yet two important cautions must be made to avoid giving the impression that degrowth is a panacea for environmental health concerns. First, these health benefits can only be realised by very deliberate processes of, on the one hand, active regulation and enforcement of environmental standards across society and, on the other hand, significant investment in environmental remediation and regeneration. Both require highly functional state capacity and policy commitment, although the latter could also be delivered locally through direct and decentralised community actions. Second, we must not underestimate negative commons, the 'baked in' health consequences of existing stocks of pollutants already in the natural environment, such as greenhouse gases (GHG) already in the atmosphere and dissolved in the oceans, and the microplastics and persistent toxic chemical agents that are already ubiquitous throughout ecosystems and organisms worldwide (for instance, see Geyer et al. 2017; Veidis et al. 2021). Degrowth may well be humanity's best chance to 'bend the curve' and minimise the eventual harms of these phenomena, but managing the health harms of the already existing pollution load on the planet will require profound and concerted effort, as in Ling (2024).

How might degrowth offer an opportunity to turn the tide on the global pandemic of mental distress and illness? Mental illness 'encompasses a wide range of body/mind states and types', which can be driven by neurological/physiological causes, a broad range of social determinants, or may simply reflect the stigmatisation of human difference and diversity (Adler-Bolton and Vierkany 2022). A longstanding line of argument (dating back at least to Nietzsche) sees 'mental illness' as a direct product and consequence of modernity. This tradition (comprising thinkers as varied as Marx, Durkheim, Fromm, Laing, Illich and Castoriadis) proposes that modernity has driven the loss of religious tradition, meaning and purpose, leading to an 'existential vacuum', nihilism and alienation – all of which lead to 'problems in living', which have come to be diagnosed as a range of mental illnesses (Roberts 2007).

More recently, it has been suggested that Western civilisation confronts a profound 'meaning crisis', with deep implications for both individuals and society (Vervaeke and Mastopietro 2021). Concerns over the health impacts (both mental and physical) of declining social connectedness and the resulting epidemic of loneliness have also grown (Surgeon-General 2023). To this mix, new stressors have been added in recent years: an intuitively and temporally plausible correlation between rising social media use and rising mental distress and illness (especially in youth) but for which proof of causation remains hard to demonstrate (Orben and Blakemore 2023); alongside rapidly expanding evidence of the adverse impacts of climate events and pollution on mental health (Cuijpers et al. 2023), and distress due to rising climate-anxiety and eco-anxiety (Patrick et al. 2022).

Therefore, there are good arguments to be made that degrowth pathways which genuinely addressed the underlying crisis of values and meaning in modernity might be expected to have a real chance of changing the trajectory of the mental health crisis by reducing inequity, restoring meaning, conviviality and community, reducing working time, positional consumption and eliminating harmful technologies, and restoring confidence in environmental futures (Büchs and Koch 2019).

Yet these are all profound, long-term social changes; and the fact that they are obviously desirable and plausible is not the same thing as being able to provide evidence that degrowth would definitely deliver these benefits. Indeed, delivering the real social, spiritual and cultural change required to address these underlying forces would probably be considerably harder to achieve than the changes to economic and political structures which are more typically focused upon by degrowth advocates (Büchs and Koch 2019). Changes of worldview of similar magnitude have historically played out fully only on a timescale of centuries, not years (Taylor 2007), very often through difficult periods.

Permanent recession or collapse, by contrast, is far more likely to bring large net harms to human health than benefits. An unplanned and unmanaged process of involuntary simplification is likely to damage health through a number of key mechanisms. Most fundamentally, failing food security would drive increasing mortality through famine; while non-fatal exposure to food stress and food insecurity (especially *in utero* and during childhood) has been shown to have a range of lifelong negative effects on development and health, and even transgenerational effects via epigenetic mechanisms (González-Rodríguez et al. 2023). Degradation or failure of safe water and sanitation systems could be expected to have significant cumulative impacts on health, through reintroduction of a wide range of infectious diseases and parasites in previously safe areas, as would the failure of control programs for vector-borne diseases.

Ever larger numbers of refugees and migrants (a group whose health is already at grave risk today) attempting to flee snowballing local catastrophes could be expected to be exposed to – and suffer even more acutely than other populations from – already grave risks such as drowning at sea or during attempted river crossings. It is also likely that deaths and injuries due to both violence and accidents would increase under conditions of such collapse. Less dramatically, enduring recession would probably be accompanied by a rising burden of illnesses due to failing food safety practices and greater local pollution (such as increased burning of biomass and informal manufacturing). Given our understanding of the mental health impacts of humanitarian disasters (Tol et al. 2011), many of those exposed to the more severe consequences of recession or collapse could reasonably be expected to experience worsened mental health.

Overall, allowing an irreversible ecological collapse by failing to act now on planetary and societal limits to growth would – second only to a global nuclear war – probably provide the most direct route to unwinding many of the substantial human health gains achieved under modernity.

Degrowth and healthcare

As noted in the introduction, modern healthcare systems have evolved as an intrinsic part of the economic growth paradigm of the 'Great Acceleration' and, in the process, healthcare has become one of the largest and most complex industries to ever exist (Hensher 2023). Global access to at least basic healthcare has increasingly come to be regarded as an essential basic need and a human right, expressed in the commitment to Universal Health Care (UHC) in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015) – even as practical progress towards achieving this commitment comes under increasing question (Yovo 2022).

Healthcare is a perfect exemplar of the need to reduce inequalities via simultaneous degrowth in high-income countries alongside much *faster* growth in resources to satisfy basic needs in low-income nations (see, for instance, Millward-Hopkins and Oswald 2023; Brand-Correa et al. 2022). In 2018, US inhabitants saw an average health expenditure per capita of $10,515, while those in the Democratic Republic of Congo spent just $32 per capita (Hensher 2023). A recent study estimated that national per capita healthcare spending of $1,398 (in purchasing power parity dollars) is required to achieve an effective level of UHC coverage (Lozano et al. 2020), yet three-quarters of the world's nations spent less than US$1,131 in 2018 (Hensher 2023).

The current literature on degrowth and healthcare centres on a number of core themes, which Aillon and D'Alisa (2020) summarise in four principles to guide the restructuring of health services under degrowth:

1. Redistributing the resources of the health system
2. Re-localising healthcare
3. Reducing overconsumption
4. Reviving or recycling alternative medical knowledge

There is broad agreement within this literature on the need for redistribution of healthcare resources, both from the Global North to the Global South and within nations, and on the need to rely on public institutions and financing rather than for-profit healthcare to achieve this change (Aillon and Bonaiuti 2024; Hensher 2020a, 2023).

Within healthcare systems, redistribution and re-localisation would tend to go hand-in-hand; a strong emphasis is placed on redistributing resources (especially personnel) from highly centralised and specialised services into greatly strengthened local primary healthcare settings (Borowy and Aillon 2017; Hensher 2020a), again pointing to Cuba's success in maintaining health outcomes through strong community-based primary care (Borowy 2013). Considerable focus is placed on the strong evidence that – especially but by no means exclusively in high-income nations – a great deal of the healthcare provided to patients is of limited or no benefit ('low-value care'), or even harmful and low-quality care (Brownlee et al. 2017; Hensher et al. 2020a). Analyses routinely suggest that between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of current healthcare expenditure is consumed by low or no-value care, and that up to 10 per cent may actually be harmful to patients (OECD 2017; Braithwaite et al. 2020). There thus seems considerable scope for degrowth without any compromising of outcomes.

Well-managed degrowth policies could greatly reduce the currently significant environmental footprint of healthcare systems, which are large emitters of GHG and other important pollutants (Hensher et al. 2020a). Combining the benefits of re-localisation and reducing overuse of healthcare might create important space for a more human-scale approach which re-centres personal care and relationships (Hensher and Zywert 2020), instead of the 'hard slog' of 'post-pandemic

industrialised care' (Heath and Montori 2023). Beyond the formal healthcare system, degrowth likely opens both the opportunity and the necessity for a greater and deeper reliance on informal care by families and communities, and for both a 'commoning' and decommodification of care, supported by a resurgence of traditional and/or indigenous healing and medical knowledge, and a greater role for rituals, spirituality or religion in the processes of illness and dying (Zywert and Quilley 2018; Borowy and Aillon 2017; Hensher and Zywert 2020; Dengler and Lang 2022). The question of death and end-of-life care is especially significant here, as 8 per cent to 11 per cent of annual healthcare expenditure is incurred by those in their last year of life, and between 13 per cent and 22 per cent on those in their last three years of life (French et al. 2017). Degrowth offers an opportunity to develop new, healthier approaches to death and dying (Király and Köves 2023). Yet the vast literature on the economic and ethical challenges of prioritising healthcare resources between different groups (especially between old and young) should caution against naïve ideas that a 'degrowth approach' would make sudden or easy progress in this area (Hensher 2020a).

The opportunity of degrowth to create an ecologically sustainable and more human-scale healthcare system unavoidably involves meeting the challenge of keeping what is best in modern healthcare while simultaneously jettisoning what is damaging – by no means a simple challenge. There is broad agreement on what should *not* be retained in a post-growth era: overconsumption of unnecessary, low value and harmful care; impersonal and dehumanising systems; rampant commodification and monopoly power over life-saving products; 'extractive abandonment' via financialised care services; gross inequalities in access to healthcare; and a pervasive focus on illness care rather than on the promotion and maintenance of good health (Hensher 2020a; Hensher et al. 2024; Corlet Walker et al. 2021, 2022; Adler-Bolton and Vierkany 2022).

It is necessary to recognise the very real challenges facing such a transformation. Healthcare systems (technologies, institutions and governance, financing, workforces, even individual health professions) have become massively more complex over only a few generations; the scale of change required to safely and deliberately reduce this extreme complexity while 'the plane is still in flight' (Hensher 2023) is as daunting as it is essential (Aillon and Bonaiuti 2024). It will require significant transformation in the education and inculturation of health professionals, accompanied by substantive decommodification of healthcare organisation, governance and financing (Missoni and Galindo 2020; Hensher 2023).

Visions of deep re-localisation must be balanced against the technical realities of production processes for a wide range of essential modern healthcare products. Even under quite different models of more resilient, common-purpose, de-globalised, decommodified and de-financialised ownership, healthcare technologies will still require complex supply chains displaying economies of scale for essential products like antibiotics and anaesthetics. In particular, precursor ingredients for many modern pharmaceuticals cannot realistically be manufactured at highly decentralised levels. Just how to maintain the high-technology manufacturing sector required for essential modern healthcare products alongside deep re-localisation has not been well articulated in the degrowth literature (Hensher 2019, 2023). Once again, complex democratic deliberations on needs, priorities and technical feasibility will be required (Hensher 2020a).

Similarly, the effective maintenance of the population health programs on which so much of today's improved health depends is not a simple task that can be fully devolved to local communities. For example, childhood vaccination programs, clean water and sanitation infrastructure, and tuberculosis and vector-borne disease control programs all require inputs and coordination well in excess of that feasible under purely local provision. These issues are consistent with more recent academic critiques of the degrowth research literature, which have pointed to inadequate efforts to examine the socio-political feasibility of and constraints to degrowth proposals (Engler et al.

2024), to properly acknowledge the key role of the state (Cosme et al. 2017; D'Alisa and Kallis 2020) or to consider alternative organisational forms for delivering complex services at larger scales (Hensher 2023).

Acting now for degrowth

Successfully preparing public health and healthcare systems for future degrowth will require concerted and deliberate advance planning and preparation. Such preparation must reflect deep knowledge of different national, regional and local healthcare systems, challenges and circumstances – generic plans can provide no more than a starting point for focused local effort. It is, however, possible to identify the critical dimensions across which this preparation must take place. These key action areas, in which preparatory activities should immediately commence within health systems, are listed in Box 19.1 with details on each action following.

Box 19.1 Action areas to prepare health systems for degrowth.

- **Stop making things worse**
- **'No regrets' actions to implement now**
- **Prepare and transform the culture of healthcare**
- **Prepare national health system assessments**
- **Advanced planning for recession or collapse**
- **Establish 'institutions of resilience' in advance of a crisis.**

Stop making things worse

Numerous negative yet preventable forces are undermining population health and access to healthcare in many parts of the world today, with an intensity not seen for many years. Armed conflict, war crimes and ethnic cleansing are killing civilians through direct lethal force, infectious diseases and famine in several conflict zones, while healthcare infrastructure is destroyed at scale in several countries, often as a result of deliberate and targeted policies. Meanwhile, GHG emissions, biodiversity destruction, other pollution and ecological destruction continue to expand, causing ill-health. Degrowth and health practitioners must take account of the reality that these forces are harming health pointlessly, avoidably and often illegally.

'No regrets' actions to implement now

Meanwhile, a number of areas of action can yield important immediate benefits for health and improved effectiveness of healthcare under current operating models, while also building a bridge towards more explicit future degrowth options – so-called 'no regrets' actions, which increase future optionality and deliver benefits here and now. The most important of these include the following:

1. Acting decisively to reduce low-value care, overdiagnosis and overtreatment (and the lobbying power behind them), especially in high-income countries (Brownlee et al. 2017; Hensher et al. 2020a)

2. Transforming healthcare systems and infrastructure everywhere to become climate resilient and low carbon (WHO 2023)
3. Improving access to high-quality, high-value low-carbon, climate-resilient healthcare in low- and lower-middle-countries – and ensuring that the fiscal and physical resources are made available to achieve this goal
4. Re-establishing effective disease control and public health interventions and infrastructure globally
5. Changing the terms of the governance of intellectual property for pharmaceuticals and other health technologies for the common good and to ensure equitable access (WHO Council 2023).

Prepare and transform the training and culture of healthcare

Successfully achieving a degrowth transition in healthcare requires not only the active engagement of health professionals but substantial changes to the prevailing cultures of 'more is better' that typify medical training and societal expectations (Missoni and Galindo 2020; Hensher 2020a). The earlier that such cultural change can begin, the better – both within the realms of education and training, and in transforming workplace and professional cultures for those who have already qualified. Key areas of transformation include:

1. Inculcating values of 'sufficiency' – doing 'enough' rather than necessarily 'doing everything possible
2. Restoring the value of 'high touch' human caring within professional cultures relative to that of 'high tech' interventions
3. Rebalancing professional prestige and financial rewards (especially within medicine) to incentivise training (and re-training) in primary care and other essential specialities and roles, and away from those which have traditionally been more lucrative or prestigious
4. Actively equipping all trainees with the skills and experience to work safely and effectively under a range of resource-constrained and adverse conditions, not just to train them for 'best practice' but also to be professionally and psychologically prepared for and resilient to more difficult circumstances
5. Building a societal culture of self-care and mutual aid, with changed attitudes to ageing and death amongst professionals and communities alike.

Prepare national health system assessments

To our knowledge, no major health systems have yet undertaken an assessment of their dependencies upon economic growth or the challenges and opportunities they might face in a post-growth or degrowth transition. Such an assessment would ideally be carried out by the national health system manager/ministry of health in each nation but could perhaps be kickstarted by philanthropic funding to pilot assessment approaches in a small number of countries. The assessment process would include the following areas:

1. Identify and quantify key current growth dependencies and system characteristics which drive growth dependency, allowing identification of key risk areas under post-growth conditions
2. Identify key opportunity areas for system improvement under a degrowth transition – where a transition could be leveraged for maximum health impact (such as commercial determinants of health, reducing low-value care, increasing system resilience)

3. Identify key barriers (such as stakeholder interests and structural factors) which currently impede these improvements through, say, profit and rent extraction, misaligned incentives, ownership structures and legislation
4. Draft advance policy 'playbooks' that could – when conditions allow – support effective action on all these leverage points to drive major system reforms consistent with a post-growth, health-maximising and resilient healthcare system for all.

Advance planning for recession or collapse

Alongside these system assessments, a very urgent task is to develop national emergency policy playbooks to guide health system responses should collapse overtake events. This work would be greatly enhanced by the use of democratic deliberative techniques like citizen juries. The aim of developing such anticipatory policy for such scenarios is to ensure that all responses to such an economic crisis are focused on safeguarding population health and on ensuring the resilient, ongoing functioning of services to safeguard universal access to essential healthcare. Important areas for development in this area include:

1. Identifying the most essential economic policy and social protection measures to safeguard population health under recession or collapse
2. Identifying and ranking low-value healthcare interventions and uses of resources, to enable rapid defunding and redeployment of these resources towards a clearly defined essential universal healthcare package, to be maintained at all costs
3. Developing frameworks for emergency stabilisation/public control/nationalisation of essential private healthcare services
4. Developing a health professionals' 'job guarantee' – a guaranteed decent living for all health professionals in return for their redeployment (and, if necessary, re-training) into new roles in the essential universal healthcare system.

Establishing institutions of resilience

A final area of preparation against the possibility of collapse involves the establishment of 'institutions of resilience'. Collapse is not just a question of economic recession or even depression; it 'represents the unplanned and undesired loss of complexity from society and its institutions' (Hensher 2020a, p. 128), from which stabilisation – let alone recovery – might take years or decades.

One suggested response to this challenge is to establish right away a small number of institutions designed specifically to be highly resilient and survivable, with the express purpose of maintaining viable knowledge and essential technological capabilities for healthcare. These might include a national repository tasked with securing, storing and disseminating clinical knowledge and guidance to ensure that the best possible care outcomes can be achieved at any level of available resource; and a public utility manufacturer of essential drugs, vaccines and medical technologies with the legal power and technical capacity to step in to manufacture any essential health product as the provider of last resort (Hensher 2020a). Such institutions of resilience would require novel legal forms and protections, ideally resourced in advance with large endowments, and might be most safely placed under the umbrella of organisations which have already stood the test of time (such as ancient universities and long-standing state corporations). They would represent – by design – the absolute antithesis of the 'start-up' model of organising innovation.

Ultimately, the process of making sensible preparations for the contingency of collapse is itself likely to provide added credibility and impetus towards thinking seriously about voluntary degrowth in healthcare. Meanwhile, the process of preparing systematically for both voluntary degrowth and enduring recession or collapse might also offer the best chance of dealing with some of the currently intractable problems that have stymied health reform in many countries across the world in recent decades.

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HOLISTIC CARE ECONOMIES
Degrowth ways of provisioning and the Global East

Lilian Pungas and Jana Gebauer

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the severity of the care crisis became manifest. This led to various manifestos from degrowth scholar-activists for a 'care-full radical transformation' (FaDA 2020; Paulson et al. 2020), urgently calling for rethinking and rebuilding the reproductive and socio-ecological caring dimensions of society. These calls recognised and problematised how the current extractive and externalising economic system continues to devalue, appropriate and exhaust the reproductive and regenerative capacities of the living world, especially women, nature and the former colonies/majority world (Mies et al. 1988; Mies 1986). Numerous authors, such as Eisler (2008) and Tronto (2013), have presented models for a change of perspective, writing about 'caring economics' and 'caring democracy', respectively. Subsequently, various proposals have been offered to rethink, transform and rebuild the society more holistically around the values of socio-ecologically sustainable and caring societies. Some of these proposals, such as Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Universal Care Income, aim to redistribute monetary resources to ensure a dignified life for all and to revalue caring activities. Others, such as Universal Basic Services (UBS) and the Foundational Economy (FE), propose the provision of needs-based common infrastructure to meet the basic human needs of all (Coote 2020; Bentham et al. 2013; FEC 2018). Combining these perspectives, the Unconditional Autonomy Allowance (UAA) has been conceptualised specifically with a degrowth horizon in mind (Liegey and Nelson 2020; Liegey 2013).

What do we expect from *holistic caring economies* as one of the leitmotifs of degrowth? It means an expansive concept of caring economies as multi-dimensional, deeply felt, and lived approaches and practices of care – nurturing earth and people alike. '*Holistic*' refers to care work, whether it is providing 'services'; making, creating or growing products from the land directly, or indirectly as 'value-added'; or regenerating and reproducing the self, others and the 'more-than-human' parts of the living world. As such, and perhaps most importantly, holistic economies defy the 'structure of separation', a line of valuation that disconnects the monetised and 'productive' from the maintenance and 'reproductive' economies – as critiqued by a range of feminist scholars, including ecofeminists, Marxist feminists and feminist ecological economists (Dengler and Strunk 2018; Jochimsen and Knobloch 1997; Salleh 1997). In other words, 'holistic' economies look at the *whole* iceberg rather than just the 'tip of the iceberg' (monetised, industrial economy and wage

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labour), as the common critique goes (Mies 1986; Gibson-Graham 1996; compare with Collard and Dempsey 2020; Henderson 1980).

Furthermore, due to their normative positioning, holistic caring economies would not only take into account the needs of the minority world but also care for the majority world, future generations and the more-than-human world (de la Bellacasa 2017; Krzywoszynska 2019; Morrow and Davies 2022). A *caring* economy (not to be confused with the narrower 'care economy') means putting care at the heart of a degrowth economy and shaping policy and the socio-economic system around this overarching goal. Various scholars, such as the Network for Caring Economy (NVW 2013), Eisler (2008), Tronto (2013, 2018 [1996]) and Gottschlich and Katz (2020), have contributed to this expansive concept. They call for a radical reorientation of our economic system around regenerative and reproductive spheres of economic processes and activities.

Finally, following on from the critique of the 'structure of separation', a degrowth *economy* would include the larger and neglected part of the 'iceberg' and bring it to the fore. A variety of ecofeminist 'iceberg' models demonstrate – and revise – the hierarchical and human-made 'structure of separation' between different forms of economic activities and processes (see Jochimsen and Knobloch (1997, p. 109); Hazel Henderson (1980); Gibson-Graham (1996); Dengler and Strunk (2018, p. 163). Figure 20.1 shows Mies et al. (1988) iceberg model of capitalist patriarchal economies, with its structure of separation, 'tip' and 'bottom' parts. Here, the full range of resources, services, livelihoods, subsistence and reproductive economic activities are seen as interdependent processes that meet societal needs, provide for the well-being and 'good life for all', and together form an essential part of the *oikos* (Bennholdt-Thomsen 2015, p. 163; Gibson-Graham 1996). Therefore, holistic care in degrowth ways takes into account all spheres of the economy highlighted by Marilyn Power's (2004) Social Provisioning Approach (SPA), including paid and unpaid activities, material and immaterial social processes and relationships that are necessary to sustain human life. In addition, it emphasises that all socio-economic systems are embedded in the biosphere, leading to an extended redefinition of social provisioning to a social-*ecological* provisioning, as outlined by scholars such as Dengler and Lang (2022) and Spash and Ryan (2023).

In the context of this critique of the current economic system and informed by the scholarship on socio-ecological provisioning, we present and discuss the aforementioned FE, UBS and UAA proposals. These contemporary attempts conceptualise and accentuate a variety of basic services and collective care infrastructures that are essential for holistic caring economies. They could

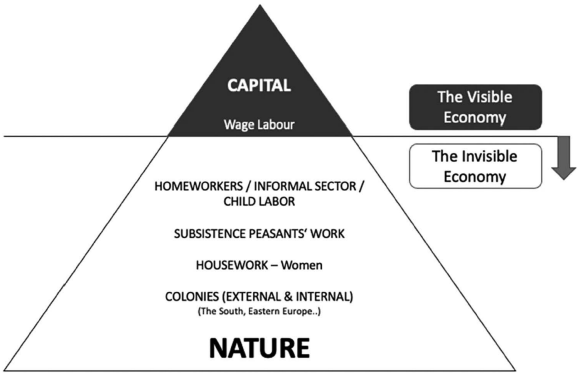

Figure 20.1 Colonialism-Capitalism-Patriarchy-Nexus of the Bielefeld Subsistence approach. Drawn from Mies et al. (1988), depiction by Pungas (2024, p. 55).

also dissolve the structural separation of economic spheres and strengthen other unrecognised but indispensable caring activities. In this context, we seek to understand, how these relatively new approaches can benefit from the rich experiences of people living in what Müller (2020) has called the Global East.

In this chapter, we apply the term 'Global East' as both an epistemological and a territorialised category, encompassing Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in East Germany, and the former Soviet Union – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Despite differences in geography, culture, history and economy, these countries share extensive real-life and on-the-ground experience with basic services and infrastructure provided by the state and made available to all with no or low user prices. We fully recognise the incompatibility of the concept of degrowth with the authoritarian and centralist political regimes and their devotion to growthism and techno-scientific industrialised progress, and we do not suggest state socialism as an example of holistic caring economies. However, what we consider important in relation to the FE, UBS and UAA proposals are socialist policies around the common sense that certain basic services and infrastructures are essential for a decent human life, and people's responses and practices which were formed in their everyday lives and from which we ought to learn.

In what follows, we briefly introduce FE, UBS and UAA, and then open up the perspective to explore what can be learned from the experiences of the socialist East as useful inspirations and critical lessons. We conclude by discussing how these inspirations and lessons can be integrated into FE, UBS and UAA scholarship to enrich and advance a degrowth-oriented leitmotif of holistic caring economies.

Providing collectively for shared basic needs – three proposals

We have put forward the FE, UBS and UAA as recent proposals, rethinking our economies to better provide for our basic needs, and we briefly present them in the following.

The *Foundational Economy* (FE) is an action research-based approach to socio-economic development that focuses on the collective provision of everyday universal basics within planetary limits. Its starting point was set in 2013 by a collective of academics in the United Kingdom (FEC 2018), who discussed what the economy should really provide for. The answer – access to food, housing, health, care, education and utilities – was set out in an FE manifesto (Bentham et al. 2013), a work-in-progress. FE is based on a zonal understanding of coexisting economies and distinguishes between the *core* economy (family and community), the *foundational* economy (provident services such as health, care; material infrastructure such as pipes, cables, housing), the *overlooked* economy (lifestyle and comfort support systems such as tourism, leisure, furniture) and the *tradable competitive* economy (industry, finance) (FEC 2020). Each zone has its own principles and objectives and follows a different logic. While politicians focus on the competitive economy (a rather small sector of the 'whole' economy), citizens are more concerned with the public service system of the foundational economy – the latter being the core interest of FE and its call to a different political focus.

Universal Basic Services (UBS) is another progressive political proposal and, like FE, a needs-based approach. It promotes securing livelihoods (*basic* – access to life's essentials) independent of wage labour for all (*universal*) in the form of public goods (s*ervices*) in order to enable human flourishing, not just mere survival (Portes et al. 2017; Coote 2020). The first mention of UBS in a report by the Social Prosperity Network in 2017 (Portes et al. 2017) called for the unconditional and collective provision of seven shared basic needs: food and water, shelter, education,

(digital) information and communication, healthcare, public transport, and democracy and legal services. UBS therefore includes sectors that already exist in some countries (healthcare, education) but aims to improve their quality and to extend the idea to new areas. Over time, other basic needs have been added: care (including childcare, elder care and adult social care), safe and secure work, physical and economic security and a safe environment.

An *Unconditional Autonomy Allowance* (UAA) has been conceptualised by scholars with an explicit degrowth horizon in mind (Liegey and Nelson 2020; Liegey 2013). The UAA proposes a list of demands that include a right to housing and real estate; the provision of basic needs such as food, clothing, furniture and more; free access to limited quantities of basic goods such as water, fuel, wood, and so on; a right to mobility, including free local public transport and a collectively decided per capita allowance for long-distance transport; and public services such as health and care, education, culture, information and communication (Liegey and Nelson 2020). UAA also calls for a so-called maximum acceptable income, which would further reduce social inequalities while financing the UAA (Liegey et al. 2012). Advocates call for transitional steps towards a UAA, such as a continuous process of cultural transformation that leaves growthism behind, the strengthening of local alternative practices and initiatives that prefigurate desirable degrowth futures, the reduction of working hours to allow time for provisioning activities, and an unconditional basic income that evolves over time through demonetisation into an UAA (Liegey and Nelson 2020).

All three proposals offer a perspective that complements the approach of unconditional monetary payments, such as in the form of UBI. Various scholars such as Büchs (2021), Bärnthaler and Dengler (2023), Dengler and Lang (2022), Uhde (2018) and Liegey (2013) have explored the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches – monetary transfers versus provision of basic goods – and their careful combination with time policies, commoning or a public care model.

From a degrowth and sufficiency perspective, all proposals for collective provisioning of shared needs offer leverage points for the much-needed socio-ecological transformation. Their inherent and strong redistributive element reduces income inequalities and promotes collective abundance and sustainable consumption rather than individual luxury and consumerism (Büchs 2021; Coote and Percy 2020). Moreover, collective provision of basic needs is not only a socially essential normative goal regarding employment and equitable access. It is also ecologically crucial, as key sectors such as food, mobility and housing are major sources of global greenhouse gas emissions and thus require collective solutions and public investment.

From a political perspective, proponents of all three proposals argue that the right to basic services is 'the substantive basis for the actual exercise of citizenship' (Calafati et al. 2023), which otherwise remains an empty, formal status and undermines democracy itself (FEC 2018; Barbera and Jones 2020). Only with a certain degree of autonomy can citizens, as political subjects, make use of their 'positive' social rights (Marshall 1965), fulfil their role as citizens, and contribute to shared collective responsibilities (Coote 2020; Liegey 2019).

Common to the FE, UBS and UAA is the overarching fundamental debate about what the economy should provide, and the deeply normative goal of social well-being with collectively provided high-quality and low-cost basic goods and public services within planetary boundaries. In addition, all approaches envision systematic, pragmatic and incremental (yet radical) change – rather than a quick policy fix (Liegey and Nelson 2020). As such, in their theoretical debates and implementation designs, they all seek to expand the purpose and goal of the economy towards more socio-ecological care, with an explicit commitment to livelihood well-being – essential for a degrowth 'good life for all'.

The cost of implementing basic services, covered by redistribution, progressive taxation and a cap on income, to name but a few, would depend on the precise scope and quality of the services

provided. However, as several proponents have pointed out, it is important not to evaluate proposals for basic services in terms of a conventional cost-benefit analysis. Not only would this mask the additional costs that would otherwise arise from the absence of public services and the costly socio-political interventions that would follow (Coote 2020). Even more importantly, the social, environmental and economic value of improving human and planetary health, well-being and social cohesion cannot be monetised.

All three proposals implicate fundamental democratic issues and need to be 'designed' with care. Gough (2019) points to the methodological dilemma of identifying the need-satisfiers (the concrete services and infrastructure) in different socio-cultural, historical and geographical contexts without being patronising. Dengler and Plank (2024) call for a normative interrogation of any provisioning system from an intersectional feminist perspective, asking: 'For whom, defined by whom, and whose perspective is (not) included?' (Dengler and Plank 2024, p. 2). Specifically in relation to FE, Dengler and Plank (2024, p. 4) criticise the separate categorisation of the core economy (family and community), claiming that this 'core' is not only an integral part of the 'whole' oikos, but:

> as a cross-cutting, rather than separate, zone – constitutes the foundation and *infra*structure of all other economic zones, as nothing could be produced in the monetized economy from 9 am to 5 pm without the unpaid work of social reproduction occurring from 5 pm to 9 am.

State-socialist public provisioning systems: experiences from the Global East

Providing basic services through an economy that serves the whole of society is not a new approach. The economies of the former socialist states of the Global East had precisely this role: to meet people's basic needs and contribute to the common good by providing basic services and infrastructure that were affordable to all. In this, the Global East is often overlooked – invisibly caught in the 'cracks' (Müller 2020) and a social, economic and political 'in-between' that is neither the Global North nor the Global South – the axis along which degrowth ideas are usually developed (Pungas et al. 2024). We as activist scholars would argue, however, that it could provide us with important lessons on essential aspects considered crucial for degrowth or socio-ecological transformation in general (Gebauer et al. 2019, 2023; Pungas et al. 2024; Cima and Sovová 2022; Sovová et al. forthcoming). The strong orientation towards economic growth, large-scale techno-industrial progress and fossil-based productivism of the socialist states (see, for instance, Chertkovskaya 2019) became manifest in physical and mental infrastructures. This is comparable to the capitalist economies of the Global North as the *starting point* for degrowth calls. However, much longer than in these countries (and often still today), people in the Global East maintain practices that can be also observed in the Global South. These are practices of (semi-)subsistence agriculture, do it yourself/do it together (DIY/DIT), maintenance and repair, resource sufficiency and circularity, and so on – a *reference point* for degrowth calls. Finally, people in the Global East have extensive experience with transitionary and transformational processes, from political-economic shifts to system change – a *process dimension* of degrowth calls.

All of this can provide valuable insights and competencies that degrowth advocates should be aware of and study in order to gain lessons and inspiration (Melegh 2021; Gebauer et al. 2023). Not least because decolonial degrowth requires spatial contextualisation and 'provincialising' of knowledge production, the need to study the Global East becomes self-evident. On the ground, we find both a rather high degree of receptiveness, not in language but in practice, and a rather high degree of reluctance, for a variety of reasons rooted in socialist and post-socialist times. Both

should be taken into account in their specificity when making the case for degrowth *in* and *from* the East. However, learning from local Eastern experiential knowledge is a 'messy' endeavour, full of contradictions, imperfections and inconsistencies (Pungas et al. 2024). Here, we join scholars such as Aradau (2024) in suggesting that post-socialism is not only a spatio-temporal description, a contested analytical dimension and a situated experience but also a method of inhabiting and productively exploring contradictions. All these characteristics are similarly argued, and confirmed, by Slavomíra Ferenčuhová et al. (Chapter 9, this volume).

In this chapter, we focus on basic needs and their collective provisioning, and therefore seek to understand what recent degrowth-motivated proposals can learn from the motives, approaches and implementation of basic provisioning in the former socialist countries of the Global East. A comprehensive analysis of their provision systems is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, based on our research and personal experience of the GDR (1949–1990) and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR, 1940–1941 and 1944–1991), and their socio-economic and political transitions after the collapse of the USSR, we outline entry points for exploring the potential and shortcomings for future holistic and caring degrowth economies. As authors, we share an interest in studying the quality of everyday life, practices, infrastructure and well-being of the past and present Global East, applying critical decolonial and ecofeminist lenses, and using inductive and practice-based theorising in our research (see, for instance, Gebauer et al. 2023; Pungas 2024). We draw on observations from our fieldwork, workshop experiences, qualitative research, and biographical experiences and memories. For instance, Figure 20.2 shows a collage-based group discussion on GDR and ESSR basic services and infrastructure with respect to degrowth. Using examples from these two countries, we now explore five sectors relevant to ideas of basic services common to all three proposals of FE, UBS and UAA (housing, food, health and childcare, mobility, education and culture).

Figure 20.2 Collage-based group discussion (2024, Haus des Wandels, Heinersdorf, Germany). Photograph by co-authors.

Housing

Once the worst of the damage of World War II had been repaired, the GDR government launched a massive housing programme in the 1970s, using industrial prefabricated construction (now rediscovered as 'serial construction') and enormous financial and human resources. The housing situation had previously been very problematic, and the new construction method not only made it possible to provide housing quickly and cheaply but also to raise the standard of living to a similar level for everyone (with central heating, hot water, baths, fitted kitchens, central laundry rooms and so on). New settlements were particularly important where new industrial and agricultural facilities had been allocated throughout the country. This allowed large numbers of people to move in very quickly; where there had been a village there was now often a small town (Lemke 2021).

Spatial planning was an integral part of the new social and economic model in the socialist countries. The aim was to create holistically planned, modern, efficient, multifunctional and aesthetic settlements in public ownership, which expressed appreciation of working people and abolished separation according to social status. Not only in the famous socialist planned cities and neighbourhoods, such as Nowa Huta in Poland, Novi Beograd in Serbia, Poruba (Ostrava) in Czechia, Lasnamäe in Estonia, Eisenhüttenstadt and Hoyerswerda in East Germany but in all new development areas, the proximity and integration of living, working and provisioning in 'micro-rayons' (micro-districts) was a fundamental aspect of urban design (Schlögel 2018). Such neighbourhoods were typically built with grocery stores and service cubes housing a variety of amenities, including post offices, hairdressers, florists, laundries, repair shops and youth clubs. Green spaces and playgrounds were provided between the houses, often laid out and cared for by unpaid collective work shifts (*subbotniks*). Local care facilities and public transport links were established, and electricity and central heating pipes were laid.

The new housing blocks – *Plattenbauten* in German, *khrushchevkas* in Russian – offered affordable accommodation and, with all their comforts, were initially welcomed by many. The integrated public infrastructure made it much easier to provide for everyday needs. The limited size of standardised apartments, together with communal spaces and the (theoretical) right to swap apartments as needed, reduced the individual consumption of resources. However, new settlements were often built on greenfield sites or on the outskirts of cities, while old buildings in city centres were demolished or neglected, not least because they appeared too bourgeois in their architecture. The new architecture reflected the development orientation of state socialism but also industrialism, productivism and growth – quite typical for the time, resource-intensive and focused on quantity rather than quality. Even more, some architecture, such as Soviet Brutalism, seemed as intimidating as the authoritarian regime and ideology itself. Heavily subsidised and fossil-fuelled central heating could not be individually regulated, and without technical means or financial incentives, energy and heat-saving tips on television as in the GDR had little impact on often wasteful usage. What's more, most of the remaining old buildings still had coal-burning stoves and, combined with the traffic circling the new neighbourhoods, the air was thick with pollution. Finally, as social proximity in the neighbourhoods increased, so did social (political) control, and housing needs were still not fully met (Mau 2019).

With contemporary ideas such as Carlos Moreno's 15-minute city or Salvador Rueda's superblocks (exemplified within Barcelona), holistic and care-centred urban planning is now being rediscovered in the West. Meanwhile, in the East, the now-aged housing blocks have been partially dismantled and many service cubes abandoned. The neighbourhoods have lost their residents and their reputation to the economic and demographic effects of the transition. However, as a new housing crisis increasingly hits Eastern cities, more blocks, service cubes and green spaces are falling victim to new resource-intensive construction activities. Not least for this reason, exhibitions

such as 'Ohne Ende Anfang – Endless beginning' (2021) at the Museum Utopie und Alltag (Eisenhüttenstadt) present and critically reflect on the complexities of socialist urban planning, seeking to inspire contemporary attempts to accommodate all the reproductive needs of residents and livelihoods alike.

Food

The socialist agri-food system also followed the leitmotif of providing well for all: politically determined and state-subsidised food prices made many basic products accessible to all. Nevertheless, constant but unpredictable shortages of various products made the notorious and time-consuming queues a daily ritual – picturesquely illustrated in an essay of Karl Schlögel (2018, p. 553). This led to counter-productive phenomena such as hoarding, informal exchange, and bartering – the so-called second economy. One Estonian gardener interviewed recounted how they always bought more of what was sold because they never knew if, when, or what would come next – leading to food waste (Gebauer et al. 2023). Similarly, recalling memories of shopping in the GDR, if the shelf said 'only one pack per person today', you knew that the item was in short supply – and you quickly sent the whole family out to buy it, even if you didn't need it.

In essence, the system of large-scale, industrialised and, to this end, forcibly collectivised state farms needed complementary subsistence production in order to meet people's food needs. During the Soviet era, food self-provisioning on *dacha* allotments – already made famous by Anton Chekhov's 1903 play *The Cherry Orchard* – became a mass phenomenon in most socialist countries. The boom in the USSR began with a decree issued in 1949 (LibUSSR 1949), and in several waves over the following decades, all factories and municipal units were called upon to provide their employees with unused land in small units (usually 600m^2) for long-term subsistence food production (Lovell 2003). Within a few decades, one in two citizens had access to very affordable arable land for growing food – often close to home, work and public transport. This also provided additional seasonal housing and was supported by policies such as early retirement.

This continues today, with an estimated 60 million people in Russia growing food on *dachas* (Grimonpont 2020). Kai Ehlers (2010), in *We will Always have Potatoes*, explores how *dachas* play a crucial role in the socio-economic resilience of Russians to external shocks. *Dacha* gardening has always served as an additional source of diverse, seasonal, pesticide-free and self-determined food supply (Pungas 2024). The small, egalitarian and decentralised structures of collective and individual subsistence increased people's autonomy and contributed to networks of reciprocity through gifts and mutual aid. While collectivisation destroyed much of the traditional peasantry and know-how, the *dacha* continued to provide the basic infrastructure for people to maintain and share common knowledge, methods and tools, and to practice food sovereignty towards a kind of frugal abundance (Pungas 2023). Although increasingly losing ground to more consumerist lifestyles and financialised land and housing markets, the scale of dacha gardening in and around many post-socialist cities still far exceeds gardening practices in Western Europe – as do the skills and know-how of gardeners in growing, processing and preserving food in ways that have been described as 'quiet sustainability' (Smith and Jehlička 2013).

Health and childcare

Socialist child and healthcare sectors were also under state management, control and planning. The health system intended to provide equal and safe health and living conditions for all and, like

other basic services, was heavily subsidised to ensure free care, treatment and medication. At the same time, facilities were located close to where people lived and worked. In the GDR, for example, outpatient polyclinics or ambulances and inpatient hospitals were easily accessible in both urban and rural areas, with local support from community nurses. There was a well-developed medical system for workers and their families in the larger companies. In addition to treatment in the event of illness, prevention and the promotion of a healthy lifestyle were important pillars of healthcare, with a wide range of preventive and screening examinations and counselling (Böttcher 2022). Today, the idea of polyclinics and ambulances is once again gaining practical relevance as centralised facilities in which several specialists and pharmacists were housed and worked together. The aim was to shorten distances and waiting time for people, and to facilitate communication and coordination between specialists. Over time, however, the financial, material, technical and human resources of various institutions became increasingly strained, resulting in a widening gap between aspiration and reality in the provision of healthcare.

This discrepancy between aspiration and reality also applied to the state's ideal of child and family care, especially in relation to gender equality. Crèches and kindergartens were located in (newly built) neighbourhoods and, therefore, easily accessible. They were also partly adapted to early and late working hours and shift work, including weekly crèches. However, it was mostly women who took care of their children before and after work. Although domestic and family work was indeed recognised as 'work', it was still unpaid and mainly the responsibility of women, who therefore worked second and third shifts alongside their jobs. As a symbolic compensation, women in full-time employment received at least one paid day off per month. Nonetheless, childcare was – like healthcare – identified as an overarching state priority and taken seriously. In various conversations we had, people confirmed that the wide range of paid care work and reproductive infrastructure made it much easier to carry out various care activities.

Mobility

In many socialist countries, it was common to have to wait many years to get a car; people in the GDR usually applied for buying one when they were 18 years of age. If they didn't need or want it, they would sell it when it finally arrived. At the same time, there was an extensive public transport network that catered for the needs of the population and was very affordable. In addition, larger enterprises were expected to contribute to the construction and maintenance of the necessary mobility infrastructure and to provide transport (shuttle bus, tram or train) for their employees. In general, state enterprises had various obligations to provide basic infrastructure, such as roads and transport, leisure and recreational activities (Liuhto 1999).

Travelling within and – with some exceptions – between the countries was affordable and accessible for most people. Most of the CEE socialist states had a very extensive railway network – the USSR, for example, had invested heavily in the Trans-Siberian Railway in its early decades. At the regional and local levels, various forms of public transport met the mobility needs of most people. While there were relatively few cars on the roads, bicycles were seen as an additional and even natural way of getting around, sharing the same roads.

Nevertheless, there was a widespread desire to own a private car. Given the limited resources, most vehicles in the socialist states, whether passenger or commercial, had to be very robust and repairable, and lasted practically forever if you had the right skills or people to fix them. A widespread reflection of this were the same old types of commercial vehicles in all the countries, and the rows of garage houses that people used as workshops to repair all kinds of vehicles

while exchanging practical skills and spare parts (Bonvin 2023, see also Vladimir Loginov's documentary 'Anthill', 2015). However, identification and satisfaction with Eastern brands fluctuated greatly and, as soon as Western models became available, the long-awaited and well-maintained car was easily replaced.

Education and culture

Education and culture were immensely important in socialist countries. Socialism, education and culture were virtually congruent. First, it was a very social(ist) ideal to provide access to good free education and culture for everyone – especially for the previously excluded working class. Second, educational institutions were supposed to educate people according to the new social(ist) ideal. Over time, the first became more restricted, especially in terms of access to higher education, while the second expanded destructively, as Mau (2019) illustrates for the GDR. However, schools took care of children and young people for most of the day so that parents could go to work. There were free or affordable school meals, school supplies, after-school care, many sports and leisure clubs and, of course, political education in youth organisations. But education was not just a matter for children; differentiated adult education and lifelong learning functioned as an important transformational factor in and for the new system (Opelt 2019).

Furthermore, cultural centres were part of the extracurricular education system in the socialist countries. These centres for culture, education and leisure were provided by the state, trade unions or state enterprises and farms. They often formed the centre of (small) town and village life, not least because prestigious buildings were reused or newly built. There was a pronounced 'circle system' with many working groups in which everything from art and culture to sport and technology could be learned and practised. This huge empowerment to recognise and develop one's own voice and strength met the ongoing transformational demands of the time. Unfortunately, most cultural centres in the GDR did not survive the privatisation period in the aftermath of 1989–1990. Before that, however, they played a crucial role in bringing people from different backgrounds together and, as such, they functioned as community (or even commoning) places. This is essentially what is needed now – social spaces for people to come together, form and strengthen their caring relationships and co-develop key transformative skills – but in a truly autonomous and empowering way, according to their local contexts, needs and interests.

Books and reading were of great importance to people of all ages, and libraries were numerous and close by – or came on wheels to the villages. Theatres and cinemas were affordable and very popular; the resources for various cultural projects and activities seemed to be plentiful. Some of them also enabled subversive challenges to the authoritarian regime in various creative ways, even leading to the so-called Singing Revolution in the Baltic states in 1989. But, in general, published (school) books and cultural activities had to conform to the socialist mindset and reproduced one-sided political narratives. Much of the cultural programme in the multi-ethnic USSR was offered only in Russian. Nevertheless, education and culture were perceived as a collective given, not something one had to be able to afford, but something that was accessible to all, allowing for significant cultural flourishing and (ambivalent) social cohesion during the socialist era.

Discussion

This chapter introduced a degrowth-based understanding of holistic care economies. As an essential building block, collective provisioning systems can make basic services and infrastructure

accessible to all to collectively address people's basic needs. We presented recent proposals for a FE, UBS and the UAA, and discussed relevant experiences from former state-socialist provision systems of the Global East. We argued that a deeper engagement with the rich heritage of the Global East in terms of, for example, basic infrastructure design and planning, (experiential) knowledge and prefigurative practices can inform, inspire and enhance decolonial degrowth scholarship.

In our qualitative research and in many conversations, we found that people in the Global East, in retrospect, often attach great importance to the social security they experienced as a given – not having to worry about existential economic issues. Being able to live a decent life with a kind of public luxury gave them a sense of general freedom and security (despite, or in contrast to, political restrictions and repression). As such basic provisioning is something people value from the past, and new proposals could (and should) build on it. Lived experience, however, has been full of contradictions and discrepancies, of ignorance, improvisation and workarounds. And lots of complaints.

We chose five sectors relevant to the state-socialist provision system and to recent provisioning proposals – housing, food, mobility, health and childcare, education and culture – which we now briefly discuss with regard to holistic and caring degrowth economies.

The combinations of economic logics and sectors varied in the state-socialist regimes, especially over time (Melegh 2021), blurring the structural separation between different spheres of the economy as illustrated in the 'iceberg' models in Figure 20.1. Generally, the part of the 'iceberg' above the waterline can be considered larger than in the current regime in terms of general visibility, financial compensation, and societal recognition. The informal economic activities of subsistence and self-provisioning, barter, reciprocity and unpaid collective work were economically necessary, in part directly supported and even initiated by the state and public authorities. Beyond household economy, the care sector and other basic services and infrastructure were recognised as the foundation for other productive and reproductive activities and declared a political priority.

Health and childcare, provision of all kinds of daily needs, education, sport, culture and social places were important concerns of spatial planning. They were free or affordable, thanks to government subsidies and directly contributing state enterprises. Located within walking or cycling distance of settlements or served by public transport, they were accessible to all.

At the same time, caring was not related to the more-than-human world. On the contrary, large-scale, fossil-based and literally terra-forming technologies were used to provide basic services and infrastructure. There were many approaches to resource conservation and recycling, but no overarching ecological perspective. Dependent on centralised policy and planning directives, centrally controlled infrastructure, and fluctuating supply, people did not truly reflect on their personal needs and resource consumption. Without real collective and individual responsibility and ownership, ignorance often developed, leading to over-consumption and waste in the face of obvious scarcity. However, practices such as recycling, repair and sharing, as well as the search for low-tech tools and technologies, are evidence of creative and inventive ways of dealing with scarcity. The magnitude and importance of these practices and skills has been exhibited wonderfully in the collaborative project 'Washing Machine Made of Beetroot' by three museums in Estonia (see Rennit 2024). The widespread dacha culture, after all, did enable a direct and caring relationship with ecological livelihoods, contributing to a convivial and sufficient lifestyle while strengthening food sovereignty. Here, access to arable land was essential.

The socialist states relied heavily on growth to rebuild infrastructure after the devastation of World War II, to overcome resource shortages and to finance the public provision system. However, the costs of the provision systems were never fully covered, and the realities lagged behind

the aspirations. New proposals must take this into account, as people became genuinely dissatisfied and lost confidence in the viability of the system.

The illustrations here demonstrate the urgent need to find ways to learn to collectively care for commons – collective resources, property and livelihoods – using democratic deliberative processes. The diffusion or even neglect of collective and individual co-caring responsibilities by the people in the socialist era was a strong issue in all sectors and resulted in people's workarounds. This can be related to a lack of true ownership, involvement and inclusion of people's local and everyday expertise in planning. A truly intersectional normative horizon for holistic caring economies will always require considering the specific local context and power relations to understand the specific needs of different communities.

With regard to transformation processes, it seems important to build *on* and *with* what exists, gradually creating new structures, processes and routines together, and enabling each other for the new. Social places such as cultural and transformative educational centres can create spaces and opportunities for this. Language is particularly important here. While many degrowth-relevant practices are relatable and can be modelled on everyday practices in the East, language varies widely, terms have different connotations, and negative experiences with key ideas may make more radical calls for degrowth less welcome in the Global East.

We have by no means been able to explore all the issues here. Therefore, we conclude with a reminder to include (post-)socialist experiences of the Global East in further developments of degrowth-related provisioning proposals. It is exciting that a 'degrowth from the East' is emerging in post-socialist countries. Scholars, activists and practitioners are contextualising and challenging calls for degrowth in a promising and creative discourse and practice.

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21

THE PEDAGOGY OF DEGROWTH AND THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

Luis I. Prádanos

Introduction

The growth-oriented dominant cultural paradigm is killing life on Earth. Recent studies indicate that almost two-thirds of planetary wildlife populations have disappeared in the past five decades (WWF 2018, p. 88), and the weight of human-made things now outweighs all biomass on Earth (Elhacham et al. 2020). This means that growth-oriented economic activity rapidly transforms life into commodities and infrastructure. We are in gross ecological overshoot, a terminal condition if not promptly reversed, and almost all environmental trends are quickly moving in the wrong direction. It is biophysically unviable to maintain the growth-oriented paradigm for much longer without collapsing most living systems on Earth (IPBES 2019), so our only viable option is to redirect our economic culture towards degrowth imaginaries and practices rapidly. Unfortunately, the popularisation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is accelerating and automating all negative social and ecological trends in the precise historical moment in which we should be changing course radically (Inclezan and Prádanos 2023).

A growth-oriented economic culture is extractive and wasteful by design and, therefore, ecologically unsustainable. In a relatively short time, the globalisation of an economic system addicted to growth has transformed the biosphere into a planetary mine and a global landfill. Unsurprisingly, this system is not only environmentally devastating but also socially corrosive as it operates by externalising its massive social and ecological costs and, in so doing, it widens inequality, destroys communitarian livelihoods, undoes social cohesion and manufactures misery for most of the global population (Lessenich 2019).

Inequality has been increasing worldwide during the past few decades, fuelled by the global dominance of neoliberal economic policies. If, in 2019, a handful of people accumulated more wealth than the poorest half of the human population combined, the pandemic only made this situation worse, and the 10 wealthiest individuals doubled their fortunes, according to Oxfam (2022). This unacceptable inequality is bad news for communities everywhere. Numerous studies in epidemiology show that the wider the income inequality, the worse all social problems become and the more difficult it gets to address pressing environmental issues effectively (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). In addition, vast economic and political power asymmetries foster resentment among the masses and entitlement among the elites (Heinberg 2021, p. 354), rapidly increasing political

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polarisation, social corrosion and mental health deterioration. All these issues are now being exacerbated, amplified and automated by the algorithms that drive the attention economy of digital capitalism.

Considering the current unacceptable social inequality and the rapidly declining health of global ecosystems, it is unsurprising that the youngest generations perceive the future as frightening (Hickman et al. 2021). They do not want more lectures about the overwhelming dire social and ecological situation (they already feel it in their bones!). They could instead learn that there are proactive leaders, initiatives and communities that do not postpone meaningful actions indefinitely (Steinberger 2022). As it is becoming more difficult to ignore that unsustainability emerges from modernity itself, the global mental health crisis coincides with the moment in which 'the structures of modernity *within* us start to crumble' (Machado de Oliveira 2021, p. 234). A pedagogy of degrowth strives to incorporate all these interconnected and rapidly changing psychosocial and ecological landscapes while not exacerbating a disempowering sense of desperation. To try to navigate this problematic line, my courses are based on what I call the 1/3–2/3 rule. For every unit of content I introduce about our socio-ecological challenges, I include two units in which we explore existing degrowth-oriented alternatives.

If our current predicament requires of us nothing less than overcoming the dominant growth-oriented paradigm, what should education's role be in this task? Unfortunately, the neoliberal turn in academic education during the last decades and the defunding of public schools are forcing many educational institutions to align their priorities with growth mandates to survive financially. Simultaneously, corporate digital platforms are overwhelmingly taking over our information ecologies and determining the structures of our social interactions, significantly and rapidly shaping and spreading toxic discourses that do not challenge the growth imaginary. Given the many powerful forces pulling in the wrong direction, what can formal and informal educators do to promote a pedagogy of degrowth that fosters alternative imaginaries based on the reconstruction of commons and the regeneration of soils and ecosystems?

The pedagogy of degrowth

In 'The pedagogy of degrowth', an essay published in 2015, I argued that 'we should be teaching how to create a new system based on socially desirable and environmentally sustainable degrowth . . . a pedagogy of degrowth needs to be envisioned, articulated, and applied across the curriculum of academic institutions' (Prádanos 2015, p. 156). A decade later, higher education still mostly teaches for the Great Acceleration rather than the 'Great Simplification' – the name of a degrowth-friendly podcast hosted by Nate Hagens (2024). Can universities help human communities thrive in a just degrowth transition, or are they mostly outdated institutions unable to transform themselves to serve the common good? Obsolete institutions, from neoliberal universities to technological corporations, often think of themselves as innovative hubs while assuming that the future will follow past trends and, therefore, promote technologies and imaginaries that automate and amplify these trends. The problem arrives when these trends are life-depleting, grossly unfair, and irremediably clash with social and biophysical limits. In these cases, obsolete educational institutions have a tragic 'de-futuring' effect (Fry 2018) by preparing students for a future that cannot materialise without collapsing the planet's living systems, immiserating most human communities, and denying a liveable environment for the next generations.

If most academic institutions evolved and expanded in a context of cheap and abundant fossil fuels and are habituated to operate by wasting energy and disregarding ecological limits, a

pedagogy of degrowth challenges these institutional mindsets by wondering what kind of education would be relevant 'to a society whose rate of energy usage is declining, not growing?' (Heinberg 2021, p. 328). What would a low-entropy educational system based on environmental justice look like? What kind of education would be appropriate for a society willing to transition from an exploitative, wasteful and extractive cultural paradigm that has eliminated 60 per cent of wildlife populations globally in 50 years to a fair and regenerative one? In sum, what would be a meaningful education in the context of a dying planet? A meaningful pedagogy in this context would emphasise regenerative design and prioritise whole systems health, communitarian learning and social justice within its local and regional contexts (Wahl 2016).

During the past decade, several concerned educators have been bringing these urgent issues into the spotlight. Although these efforts are not organised under any coherent academic field of study – why should they be so? – they are giving rise to an emerging pedagogy of degrowth that is gaining momentum. Some authors mention degrowth explicitly (Prádanos 2015; Getzin and Singer-Brodowski 2016; Díez-Gutiérrez and Díaz-Nafría 2019; Kaufmann et al. 2019; Jones 2021). Others do not. But all recognise that education can no longer ignore planetary limits in a time of unacceptable inequality, climate disruption, energy decline and ecological overshoot. In other words, the pedagogy of degrowth is fully aware of biophysical and social limits. Emerging groups such as the Planetary Limits Academic Network (PLAN 2024), Faculty for a Future (2024) and the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF 2024) arts and research collective are trying to channel these efforts to create synergies.

A couple of recent books go deep into the roots of these issues and offer reflections and practical tips for completely redirecting our educational paradigm – *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism* by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) and *Teaching at twilight: The meaning of education in the age of collapse* by Ahmed Afzaal (2023). They follow the lead of previous holistic educational thinkers such as Ivan Illich, Paolo Freire, Joanna Macy and David Orr. In this chapter, I am focusing primarily on contributions in English – the language of this edited volume – but a pedagogy of degrowth is not limited to any specific language or geographical context. Numerous examples of degrowth-oriented educational contributions exist in many languages, traditions and regions. For example, while I was writing this chapter, a book titled precisely *Pedagogía del decrecimiento* (Díez-Gutiérrez 2024) (translating as 'pedagogy of degrowth') was published in Spain.

The pedagogy of degrowth understands that '[o]ur dominant societal values . . . are fundamentally oppositional to sustained well-being' (Lent 2022, p. 226) and that we live within 'a broken culture that can no longer offer direction, vitality, sanity, or hope' (Machado de Oliveira 2021, p. 214). In this context, many professional educators face a crisis of meaning, given that most academic curricula are designed to perpetuate the dominant societal values that are killing both living systems and the joy of meaningful learning at an ever-increasing pace. There is a leadership gap that degrowth-oriented educators are called to fill to correct this situation (Afzaal 2023, p. 189).

It is increasingly clear that the key to better learning is not about providing more information and 'smarter' technologies to students but for formal education to abandon its growth-oriented, extractivist, hierarchical, (neo)colonial, and logocentric approach and to focus instead on whole systems health, embodiment, community, justice and regenerative practices. Recognising that '[a]ll feelings are teachers' (Schmidt 2023, p. 57), degrowth-oriented educators often rethink the desires they promote and normalise within their learning environments and are increasingly intentional about not perpetuating the linguistic frames attuned to extractive and exploitative imaginaries. As humans irremediably think in metaphors, our linguistic framing has significant ethical and political implications. Our perspective of reality is not the same if we refer to living systems as

machines to be controlled, managed and exploited rather than if we talk about them as complex and dynamic ecologies in which we are inextricably entangled in intimate ways. The way we frame socio-ecological issues significantly conditions how we respond to them. Land could be seen as property to exploit or as a nourishing mother. Sunaura Taylor (2021) explains that

> when asked how Native people can reclaim relationships to homelands in urban spaces when the land or water is too polluted to swim in or eat from, Leanne Simpson, a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist, has this to say: "You do not abandon your mother when she is sick. You do not abandon the land because it is contaminated or encroached upon".

If, as most degrowth educators understand, the sense of separability (between individuals and their communities as well as between humans and more-than-humans) that modernity promotes is at the root of our socio-ecological crisis, a pedagogy of degrowth must contribute to foster ways of being, feeling and thinking that counteract this ideology of fragmentation, disconnection and separability that caused what Carolyn Merchant called 'the death of nature' (1983). We have to be careful about not perpetuating hierarchical classifications of knowledge within the learning communities we facilitate because '[c]lassification is . . . key to colonialism' and 'when classifications work well, they become infrastructure' (Shotwell 2016, pp. 25, 66, respectively). To avoid the mindset of separability, purity and classification that makes conceivable and acceptable the exploitation of bodies and ecologies, and to recognise the inextricable interdependence and interpenetration of all life, Kim Q Hall suggests that a metaphysics of compost would be more appropriate (Shotwell 2016, p. 16) than utilitarian and mechanical frames based on separation and purity. Again, metaphors matter.

According to Dan Shilling, '[t]he prevailing standards shaping most Indigenous relationships to the natural world were *restraint* and *reverence*' (2018, p. 12). If this is the case, a key goal for the pedagogy of degrowth would be to intentionally disrupt the sense of separability ingrained in dominant ways of thinking and feeling while promoting ways of relating with the more-than-human world based on restraint and reverence.

Most degrowth educators agree that what we are facing in this unprecedented convergence of crises is not a problem for which some clear solutions exist but a predicament that will not go away and for which no painless options are left. There is also a growing consensus that more information and intellectual thinking about the socio-ecological crisis is insufficient to change the growth-oriented cultural paradigm. Given the fact that 'emotional responses, not conceptual information, drive narrative's impacts on audience member's worldview' (Caracciolo 2021, p. 11), the best ways to respond to our predicament require communities to cultivate a plethora of different skills (beyond conceptual information) rarely included in academic programs, such as spiritual meaning, emotional intelligence, communitarian care, cultural experimentation, social innovation, and reconstruction, revitalisation and reinvention of commons of all kinds. All this suggests, as Ivan Illich and others have recognised, that formal and academic educational institutions have historically contributed to legitimating and perpetuating the growth imaginary much more than to challenge it. As such, a successful pedagogy of degrowth would facilitate the transition from homogeneous academic institutions to a wide range of more diverse, autonomous and experimental educational settings (Lazányi et al, Chapter 23, this volume). While a small number of existing educational institutions may achieve this radical transformation, the pedagogy of degrowth would likely propagate from parallel emergent educational alternatives (Ecoversities Alliance 2024).

At this point, it should be clear that it is not, and never was, possible to control social and ecological outcomes at the complex global scale of our crises. The illusion of human control over a 'separated' nature created by a fossil fuels' driven modernity is coming to an end (Heinberg 2021, pp. 295–6). Degrowth-oriented scholars explicitly and compellingly challenge the current reformulations of this illusion ingrained in ecomodernist discourses and other similar counterproductive techno-managerial environmental framings that justify perilous geoengineering interventions rather than challenging existing power relations. Degrowth favours 'no-regret strategies' for dealing with socio-ecological issues (Heinberg 2021, pp. 349–50) and, following the tradition of political ecology, emphasises that environmental issues are always political struggles. By recognising the illusion of control within complex socio-ecological systems, degrowth educators irremediably deal with the complication of embracing uncertainty and letting go of outcomes while avoiding passive resignation and encouraging hopeful but humble activism. Several contributions have commented on embracing these messy, unavoidable contradictions – recognising uncertainty without giving up political activism – in compassionate and fruitful ways (Macy and Brown 2014; Brown 2017).

Green capitalist discourses emphasise the need to decarbonise the economy as if this task would only require financial, managerial and technological innovations. But what does it really mean that a fossil-fuelled civilisation needs to decarbonise? (Afzaal 2023, p. 174). For a pedagogy of degrowth, the answer to this question entails something more profound than what technological, managerial, financial, legal and policy innovations have to offer. Decarbonising petromodern societies and cultures will require nothing less than a radical change in our ways of being in the world (ontologies), our ways of relating to each other and the more-than-human world, and a profound transformation of our institutions and imaginaries. We must change the stories we live by, as the dominant ones are killing life on Earth (Stibbe 2015). To organise our social reproduction in decarbonising and regenerative ways, we need 'alternatives that are viable but unimaginable within modernity's frames of reference and desirability' (Machado de Oliveira 2021, p. 101). In this vein, some preliminary principles for guiding the design of degrowth pedagogies able to unlock the political imagination that is needed to conceive degrowth alternatives perhaps would be found in the answers we provide to the following question: whom do we have to be in order to organise our societies in equitable manners that meet everyone needs in ways that regenerate and replenish, rather than deplete and plunder, the planet ecosystems? The always tentative and socio-ecologically contextual answers to this question may guide and inform the formats and contents of our emerging degrowth-oriented pedagogies.

If the main neoliberal education goal is to train students to contribute to the growth economy (the same one that is rapidly killing life on Earth and immiserating billions), the pedagogy of degrowth strives instead to prepare people to become 'wise elders and good ancestors' (Machado de Oliveira 2021, p. 9; Hausdoerffer et al. 2021; Krznaric 2022). If we understand that techno-industrial modernity is a dying system, we should prepare students to overcome it and create alternatives rather than increase their attachments to and dependencies on the zombie paradigm of which they must let go. The question for degrowth educators remains, as Macy and Brown (2014) or Machado de Oliveira (2021) frame it, how to train our students and ourselves to become, simultaneously, compassionate hospice workers for the dying paradigm and capable nurturing midwives for the emerging ones.

Again, the guiding principles for our pedagogies could emerge from the following question: what do communities have to become to live regeneratively and equitably in the context of an impoverished biosphere? Once we consent to some tentative answers in our specific context, we can try to incorporate into our learning communities whatever we consider helpful for us to

become that collectively. Of course, the answers to these questions should not be imposed by any specific educator, politician or administrator but by each learning community working within their contexts (again, formal and academic educational institutions may not be very helpful, considering their universalising, homogenising, ethnocentric and imperial histories). For example, if a community decides that the answer may be to behave collectively in a way that its social metabolism integrates in a mutually beneficial way with its surrounding bioregion, then a pillar of a degrowth education in this context could be to experiment with a sort of cultural biomimesis (Kimmerer 2018) in which the learning community tries to emulate regional flourishing ecosystems in the way it designs its local food system and social institutions (including, of course, its educational spaces and practices). Relevant things to learn in this context would be permaculture, traditional ecological knowledges, analog forestry, agroecology, regenerative agriculture, communitarian organising, processes and rules for limiting power accumulation and power asymmetries, transition design, bioconstruction and infrastructural repurposing, detoxification (with plants and fungi), composting (including humanure) and so on.

At a more abstract level, the pedagogy of degrowth promotes intergenerational, long-term systems thinking. To do this, it strives to correct the widespread 'energy blindness' (Hagens 2022) and ecological illiteracies ingrained in the growth-oriented imaginary. Put otherwise, a key goal for the pedagogy of degrowth is to reactivate the metabolic literacies and intelligences that '[m]odernity has deactivated' (Machado de Oliveira 2021, p. 216). This process of (un)learning and (re)membering would be designed to encourage students to pay attention to flows, interrelations, and connections at multiple levels and scales (permaculture does this very well in theory and practice).

As the planet rapidly becomes biologically impoverished, humans get more self-absorbed in their 'smart' technologies (Heinberg 2021, p. 220). A pedagogy of degrowth learns from life wisdom and, therefore, avoids getting trapped into this dangerous autoreferential and anthropocentric logocentrism that dominates popular culture and academic institutional mindsets. A pedagogy of degrowth also honours the utmost importance of play, creativity and beauty in healthy learning processes and, therefore, avoids the neoliberal obsession with meaningless metrics and assessments that are nothing but a joy killer for educators and students (Muller 2018, pp. 67–101). Degrowth pedagogies intentionally discourage free-riding mindsets (avoiding, for instance, individualistic and competitive learning styles) by embracing cooperative learning and pedagogies of care to nourish communities willing to experiment with alternative imaginaries based on social innovation and diversified power.

The political ecology of technology as a pedagogical intervention

Degrowth pedagogies are simultaneously contemplative and action-oriented. Contemplative in the sense that they invite a slower and calmer (un)learning pace more compatible with ecological temporalities and human frailties rather than striving to attune their educational rhythm to the ever-accelerating time of turbocapitalism. Action-oriented, these pedagogies do not dwell for too long in a mere intellectual and abstract critique and always learn by intervening in the ground at the practical and experimental levels. There is a plethora of experimentation with spiritually oriented, communitarian, and not logocentric pedagogies based on decolonial practices for collective care and healing, an emphasis on alternative practices (permaculture sites, pluriversal designs, Constellation of the Commons, Global Tapestry of Alternatives, Uniterra), and systems thinking (Capra and Luisi 2014; Macy and Brown 2014), as well as a proliferation of Degrowth Summer Schools, degrowth policy research projects, and experimental sites for degrowth transitions (Lazányi et al., Chapter 23, this volume). All these are meaningful and much-needed contributions

but are made invisible, when not wholly obliterated, by the dominant economic narratives and the algorithms of platform capitalism. However, not many degrowth-oriented projects and pedagogical interventions focus on AI.

Degrowth scholars' insistence on convivial and appropriate technologies and their highly sophisticated critique of techno-optimism and ecomodernism may have the unintended consequence of disadvantageously dealing with the attention economy of platform capitalism and with the most powerful digital tools to change collective imaginaries by hesitating to engage with these tools deeply. Let me make clear that I fully understand that industrial technologies, in general, and digital technologies, in particular, are imperial tools that are mostly incompatible with an emancipatory future and, therefore, need to be regulated, deescalated and redesigned as soon as possible. I do not believe that these technologies can be meaningfully appropriated for degrowth purposes, as engaging with them tends to reinforce their growing power, direct our attention in disturbing ways, and modify our habits to align them with growth-oriented interests. In addition, I concur with Andrea Vetter (2018; Vetter and Fersterer, Chapter 14, this volume) on the need to advance and assess convivial technologies for degrowth. That said, it seems to me that understanding AI technologies and how they are applied to rapidly transform our social imaginaries, economic incentives and information flows is critical for any movement that wants to challenge the dominant order of things.

AI algorithms are currently changing imaginaries much faster than formal education ever did. Social networks and other digital platforms have become the most effective political socialisers (Klein 2023). Unfortunately, the opposite ideological spectrum from degrowth is disproportionally 'benefiting' from this algorithmic expansion. This has disturbing political, social, and environmental consequences everywhere. How can degrowth educators find a middle ground between understanding and acknowledging the negative social and ecological implications of modern high-tech in general, and digital 'smart' technologies in particular, while not shading away from hacking and harvesting their immense power to redirect the collective imagination towards just and regenerative imaginaries? I do not claim to offer an answer to this wicked problem, but I believe that the pedagogy of degrowth would benefit from discussing it.

As mentioned, some of the most sophisticated critiques of techno-optimism and ecomodernism come from degrowth researchers (Alexander and Rutherford 2020). This is a much-needed intervention as it helps us to recognise that techno-optimism is energy blind, politically counterproductive, and historically shallow. However, relying only on convivial tools while renouncing the most powerful ones for influencing collective imaginaries at scale allows growth-oriented elites to consolidate their power around these technologies and manipulate global collective imaginaries in disturbing ways (Klein 2023; Peirano 2019; Bridle 2018).

Could we use AI technologies to make degrowth and postdevelopment policies desirable and thinkable beyond activist and academic circles and, therefore, politically enactable? 'Digitalization cannot be simply appropriated, and directed to different goals' (Caffentzis 2019, p. 39). Granted, but neither can it be ignored without quickly losing so much political terrain, as Naomi Klein (2023) compellingly unveils in *Doppelganger: A Trip to the Mirror World*. To deal with this conundrum, I believe that paying more attention to what we are calling 'the political ecology of technology' (Inclezan and Prádanos 2023; Almazán and Prádanos 2024) could enhance the pedagogy of degrowth, at least until platform capitalism runs out of energy (literally and figuratively). In the meantime, we must understand how narratives and stories flow and how emotions and habits change when mediated by AI technologies. How can we use AI algorithms to make degrowth sensibilities viral when the attention economy is designing and using these tools to monetise our desires, fears, and anxieties in toxic and dangerous ways?

In the long run, considering the vast energy and material intensity of digital technologies (which the proliferation of data centres is rapidly accelerating), postcarbon societies will likely be post-digital societies or, at the very least, societies limiting the role of 'smart' applications to – hopefully collectively decided and managed – very selective functions. But, in the meantime, we have to think hard about how degrowth educators can acknowledge that techno-optimist and reformist solutions are 'ecologically wasteful profit-making distractions' (Kothari et al. 2019, p. xix), while seizing the opportunities for the extraordinary levels of dissemination and cooperation that digital technologies afford to make degrowth imaginaries viral and desirable. One possibility may be to experiment with some form of 'open localisation', which means striving to re-localise the material and energy-intensive activities as much as feasible while keeping local communities as culturally open as possible through community-controlled, designed and managed digital tools (Velegrakis and Gaitanou 2019, pp. 259–62).

I do not have a satisfactory answer. My point is that ignoring AI technologies does not seem to be a good political strategy at this moment, but we should be well aware of the risk of becoming machine food as we engage with them (remember that they are explicitly designed to maximise engagement to mine our data and monetise our attention). AI for the common good and sustainability is mostly a dangerous fantasy (Inclezan and Prádanos 2023). These tools are designed and implemented in a growth-oriented, exploitative and extractivist paradigm. But, while the current order of things is as it is, we should not shy away from exploring the following questions: what would an effective degrowth influencer look like? How can we make a degrowth motto viral and trendy? How can we change the metaphors and the frames of the most consequential political debates in ways that degrowth sensibilities become commonsense and growth-oriented discourses and policies are the ones that need justification and not the other way around? How do we attract attention to what really matters (inequality, ecological issues, community cohesion and empowerment) when 'data colonialism' diverts and manipulates our mental and emotional energy in politically counterproductive ways (Couldry and Mejias 2019)? And, finally, how can we use digital technologies to generate diagonal and broad political alliances to advance degrowth policies rather than dividing our forces in internal fights due to ideological rigidities and patriarchal leadership styles?

In the age of fake news and algorithmic radicalisation, it is not nearly enough to have the facts right and to design sound degrowth economic policies that are never implemented as long as the dominant social imaginary does not consider them in its menu. To include new items on the menu, degrowth pedagogies must make degrowth debates viral and engage broad audiences. For that to be possible, degrowth activism needs to be strategically wise and technologically savvy, more so than the corporate and totalitarian actors currently delineating our technosocial pathways and infrastructures to align them with their interests, which are incompatible with the common good and planetary life. *The Enemy Knows the System*, as the title of the book by Marta Peirano (2019) on digital technologies and economic power compellingly explains. We should know the system's technicalities, too. Consequential interventions often come with monetarised rewards in the context of the attention economy, platform capitalism and data colonialism. This may not necessarily be a problem as long as successful degrowth influencers have clear and transparent mechanisms to redistribute and redirect those rewards to fund initiatives and support projects aligned with the pedagogy of degrowth: the Postgrowth Institute, free permaculture courses for refugees, community-managed food forests, public kitchens, grants for more research and practice into the political ecology of technology, think tanks to lobby for degrowth-oriented policy and so on. Again, this is an old and never-solved dilemma: is there a non-counterproductive way to simultaneously dismantle and mobilise imperial technologies of power while they are quickly

transforming our psychosocial and physical landscapes? Is the cost of disengaging higher than the unintended consequences of intentionally engaging with existing technologies of power?

In sum, we have to recognise that 'cultural evolution is now happening faster than ever' due to AI, but it is mainly accelerating our demise and taking us into an evolutionary trap (Heinberg 2021, p. 357). 'The same tight coupling between global systems that increases the risk of civilizational collapse also boosts the speed at which deeper, systemic changes can now occur' (Lent 2022, p. 374). These technological convergencies bring '[o]pportunities for extraordinary levels of cooperation' (Heinberg 2021, p. 357) which, unfortunately, are being proactively and effectively seized by powerful corporative and authoritarian interests. Could degrowth advocates also tap into these opportunities without becoming machine food? It will certainly not be easy, and we should remember that 'in the absence of fundamental socio-cultural transformation, technological and managerial innovation will not lead us out of the crises' (Kothari et al. 2019, p. xxvii). To tackle this conundrum in meaningful ways, I claim that the pedagogy of degrowth would benefit from incorporating a sort of political ecology of technology that introduces some of the key aspects of critical AI studies. I found that Verso is the press with the most interesting list of English titles dealing with these topics in radical and critical ways. For a review of some of the critical AI literature, the reader may refer to an essay about the social and ecological implications of AI (Inclezan and Prádanos 2023).

The 2008 collapse of the neoliberal manufactured consensus triggered the intensification of different cultural responses: degrowth imaginaries, xenophobic nationalisms, and ecomodernist technocratic globalism. As pointed out in *Postgrowth Imaginaries* (Prádanos 2018), the first cultural response has the potential to bring about socially desirable and ecologically viable emancipatory politics, while the last two are toxic responses that need to be challenged and dispelled. Obviously, the pedagogy of degrowth promotes post-growth imaginaries while helping communities recognise the flaws and dangers of the other two. However, the toxic cultural responses are energised and catalysed by the algorithms of the attention economy as they are compatible with the growth imaginary, the illusion of human and/or national exceptionalism, and the fantasies of purity and separability. Degrowth educators strive to reverse this trend by exposing all those toxic fantasies while making communitarian frugal abundance desirable to as many people as possible. Not just because it is the only way for all beings to thrive on a finite planet, but because it is much better and more joyful than hardly surviving in a hypercompetitive society dominated by toxicity, tensions, precarity, risks, violence and dangers resulting from the wars between insane, entitle elites and the manipulation and polarisation of resentful precarious masses. The alternative hedonism advocated by the pedagogy of degrowth is much more interesting, sensual and pleasant than the sad, competitive, commodified and stressful one offered by turbocapitalism (Soper 2020).

In closing

Degrowth offers new narratives, better metaphors and practical material ways to satisfy our needs in common while regenerating soils and enhancing biodiversity. A pedagogy of degrowth is an education for the commons, and it is open to experimenting with pluriversal ways of organising social reproduction while balancing individual and communal needs. A pedagogy of degrowth encourages experiential and prefigurative learning – living the alternatives – while navigating the increasing precarity and traumatic experiences of our predicament (Macy and Brown 2014; Lazányi et al., Chapter 23, this volume).

The pedagogy of degrowth does not claim to be a new pedagogy but an umbrella term that allows for the fruitful convergence of many pedagogical sensibilities united by their degrowth

and emancipatory orientation as well as by the understanding that a meaningful education liberates all people, empowers communities, enhances biodiversity and heals soils. It is a pedagogy of limits that builds on the insights of critical, indigenous and autonomous pedagogies, as well as many other educational counterhegemonic traditions based on cooperative, communitarian and participatory learning. The pedagogy of degrowth is a pedagogy of care, as it understands that a learning environment should always be a healing and regenerative environment that fosters learning communities able to build the trust, courage and empathy needed to share joy and process pain in politically fruitful ways.

Ideally, the pedagogy of degrowth minimises the use of unnecessary corporative technologies while discussing the political ecology of technology. It avoids excessive abstractions and the tyranny of metrics (a joy killer) by incorporating local case studies, service-learning collaborations, grounding practices, and spiritual, emotional, and physical ways of knowing and learning. It embraces prefiguring pluriversal ways of being while wisely using leverage points and openings within the existing order of things. Put otherwise, practising permaculture and debating the political ecology of technology are not incompatible but complementary. For this to be possible, we need to be strategic and let go of purity and rigidity. This means not forcing ourselves to choose between engaging in institutional reforms or radical interventions. Let each of us start digging where we are rather than judging how our allies are digging.

If broadly embraced, the pedagogy of degrowth opens untapped potentialities and possibilities for collective well-being, environmental justice, and ecological regeneration. It is a philosophy of limits that paradoxically unlocks a pluriverse of unlimited creativity for designing multiple ways in which human communities could organise their social reproduction in symbiotic and equitable ways. The pedagogy of degrowth is simply about teaching and learning as if people and the planet mattered.

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MAPPING THE SPECTRUM OF DEGROWTH WORK

Eeva Houtbeckers

Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of the variety of degrowth perspectives and themes in the field of work. Degrowth refers to a multitude of conceptual and practical proposals challenging the growth economy and making way for socially, ecologically, economically and culturally just living and working (Barca et al. 2019). Interrelated socio-ecological crises have resulted in calls for rethinking the world of work (Bottazzi 2019). There are various disciplines and transdisciplinary research fields that discuss work and ecology together, such as environmental philosophy (Soper 2020), environmental sociology (Pettinger 2017), labour studies (Gollain 2016), political ecology (Coe 2021), community economies (Miller 2019), post-growth (Seidl and Zahrnt 2021) and degrowth (Barca 2019a).

The overall argument is that work is an understudied phenomenon when it comes to addressing socio-ecological crises – despite the fact that humans, as any other species, connect to their environment via work (Suzman 2020). Creating and maintaining liveable habitats require efforts for food, shelter and caring for offspring. Contemporary anthropocentric socio-ecological crises require reimagining various aspects of societies, such as infrastructure, energy, housing, division of wealth and care (D'Alisa et al. 2015). Transformation to degrowth societies requires work at two frontiers – abandoning unsustainable practices while creating sustainable ones. This results in fundamental changes in ways of organising work, ensuring livelihoods and interspecies solidarity (Montt et al. 2018; Barca 2020). To make a *just* degrowth transition, adaptations in the world of work need to be fair for all (Barca 2019a; Ding and Hirvilammi 2024).

It may be laborious to distance oneself from taken-for-granted understandings of work. Yet, reorganising work is needed if only because the impacts of anthropocentric socio-ecological changes are already felt in the world of work 'extremely unevenly – geographically and socially – due to both varying reliance on the most directly affected economic activities and the fragility of underlying ecosystems' (Coe 2021, p. 450). Relatedly, many degrowth advocates take seriously the scale of changes needed in the world of work, of which this chapter offers an overview. First, I present briefly the history of the notion of work in degrowth thinking from the 1970s onwards. Second, I review contemporary degrowth proposals to highlight degrowth discussions on work since the 2010s. Third, I classify existing research to advance the discussions about degrowth and work.

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Finally, I aim to strengthen the discussion on degrowth work to deepen further research and policy proposals.

The notion of work in early degrowth thinking

Degrowth emerged as a reaction to the post-war political economy of growth (Barca et al. 2019). Muraca and Schmelzer (2017) – see too Schmelzer and Muraca, Chapter 7, this volume – illustrate the history of degrowth thinking from the 1960s onwards in Southern European ('*décroissance*, *decrescita*, *decrecimiento*'), German- ('*Postwachstum*'), and English-speaking debates. They highlight how the growth critique developed somewhat independently in these three regions in the Global North. The discussions were inspired in varying degree from the thinking of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Herman Daly, André Gorz and others critiquing growth. The three discussions had differences in, for example, the critique of capitalism and understanding the role of the state. Yet, there were also similarities in critiquing growth, such as gross domestic product (GDP) as a central accounting model and making visible the environmental and social costs of the growth economy. These debates were active until the 1980s when sidelined by a policy focus on sustainable development. It was not until the late 2000s that these debates started to converge, thanks to the international gatherings of degrowth thinkers and activists.

Theorising degrowth and work started in the 1970s alongside with rethinking and criticising the growth paradigm. In *Critique of Economic Reason* (1989), André Gorz writes extensively on work and draws from various thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx. Moreover, Gorz (1989) highlights how work in modern times is entangled with capitalism and maps autonomous alternatives for individuals and communities. These and other ideas paved the way for a rich French-speaking discussion on work and degrowth in the 2000s, as indicated in the second issue of *Entropia* (Spring 2007) on the theme of work. In parallel, the active German critique of growth in the 1970s and 1980s included a focal emphasis on the role of work with, for example, an extensive collection of books (Muraca and Schmelzer 2017, p. 185). These prefigurative debates resulted in political action, including the German Green Party proposing a 35-hour working week, supported by the trade unions (Muraca and Schmelzer 2017, pp. 186–7). These examples show the ways in which the capitalist philosophy of work – one must get paid work to earn one's livelihood – was challenged in various places in this period.

Stefania Barca (2019b, p. 183) concludes that 'the growth society is the same as the work society'. In the 'treadmill of production' work acts as a force for economic growth and intensifies energy and resource use and pollution (Gunderson 2019; Barca 2019b). There is an assumed, and at times observed, conflict between work and the environment, since workers may not automatically support environmental protection due to a fear of losing jobs (Pettinger 2017). Yet, the International Labour Organization, including labour unions, has worked with ecological themes since the 1970s (Olsen and Kemter 2013) by highlighting the importance of treating worker and environmental issues together since 'there are no jobs on a dead planet'.

Degrowth activists and advocates have challenged waged work within capitalism with similar key principles since the early days of degrowth. This entails suggesting an interpretation of various diversified ways of engaging in the economy, emphasising 'care, cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity, conviviality, autonomy, and direct democracy' and rejecting the understanding of humans as 'individualist, consumerist, and workerist homo economicus' (Barca et al. 2019, p. 4). There are various degrowth discussions on work calling for decommodification and decolonisation, and understanding degrowth work as, for example, convivial and autonomous.

Scoping review of degrowth and work

According to Suzman (2020, p. 8) '[t]he closest thing to a universal definition of work . . . is that it involves purposefully expending energy or effort on a task to achieve a goal or end'. There are several concepts used for work and related phenomena in English, such as paid labour, employment, job or unpaid reproductive labour. Degrowth includes different schools of thought and various thematic discussions, work being only one of them (see, for example, Fitzpatrick et al. 2022; D'Alisa et al. 2015).

The expanding research on *degrowth* and *work* examines the growth dependencies of work, discusses the role of work in pursuing transformations, and explores options for living and working within planetary boundaries. In their systematic review of various degrowth policy proposals, Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) divide proposals on work into reconceptualising work, reducing unemployment, redistributing (re)productive activities, and promoting social and ecological jobs. While the breadth and depth of degrowth work proposals cannot be summarised easily, Arial Salleh's (2009, p. 24) thinking on a meta-industrial economy offers an overview of the type of implicit discourse in many degrowth proposals. Thus, I present Salleh's thinking here for descriptive rather than prescriptive reasons.

Salleh (2009) highlights that the so-called productive economy is based on reproductive work of subliminal groups and metabolic work by nature, which are ignored in the economic discourse. In economic discourses waged labourers and entrepreneurs are framed as the main economic actors, and benefits are based on exchange value and only occasionally use value. However, this economy implicitly creates social, embodied and ecological debts, since it exploits workers' surplus and reproductive labour while degrading the environment. Second, the subliminal discourse recognises that women, peasants and indigenous peoples do relational and cyclical work, which is based on use and metabolic values incurring minimal social, embodied and ecological debt. Possible changes within this system respect cultural autonomy and gender justice. Third, the ecological discourse emphasises that plants and animals, including humans, have agency through relational, cyclical and regenerative flows. The thermodynamic sector generates metabolic value and organic reproduction, which maintains ecosystems and human societies.

I illustrate examples of the vast spectrum of degrowth proposals on work by reviewing my ongoing Scopus searches since 2017 (TITLE-ABS-KEY (postgrowth OR post-growth OR degrowth AND work OR labour OR labor OR employment OR employee OR employer OR job). In addition to the Scopus search that has generated 378 articles and book chapters, I have reviewed other academic texts that I have come across during my research (snowball sampling). I have employed a scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley 2005), which is not a systematic review with specific questions, but a sweeping review on *what* is discussed in previous literature and *how* – how work is discussed in degrowth scholarship. For example, there is often a claim that 'work is important for degrowth' without further explanation.

Based on reading existing degrowth research on work, I divided degrowth proposals addressing work into three – first, proposals related to waged labour; second, proposals beyond waged labour and, third, proposals rethinking the notion of work. Although there are excellent works on social policy related to work, I only refer to them in passing due to space limitations. In addition, the notion of income is less discussed due to the literature in the scoping review. I return to the perspective of social policies and income. Finally, this chapter mainly draws from texts written from the perspective of minority worlds – Western thinking and the Global North. To complement this view, I include examples of decolonial, postcolonial and subaltern thinking.

Degrowth proposals on waged work

Although rethinking socio-economic systems from the perspective of degrowth destabilises the role of waged labour, it is still the dominant model of livelihoods in the minority worlds (Büchs and Koch 2017; Seidl and Zahrnt 2021). Thus, many degrowth proposals also focus on waged labour such as work time reductions, a four-day work week, job sharing, job guarantee, workplace democracy, labour productivity, energy intensity, employment rates, basic income and supporting social policies. Although these proposals mostly concern waged labour, and with mainly economic and statistical justification, they do envision a *shift* towards a different paradigm in which work is done.

Antal (2014) brings together observations commonly circulated in degrowth work discourse: first, *the global environmental impacts of economic growth* are evident and, second, there is persistent *unemployment due to lack of economic growth*. They conclude that in the current system it is not possible to maintain green growth and full employment. Thus, many degrowth proposals on waged labour try to overcome this dilemma by proposing either reducing the environmental impacts of waged labour and/or ways for maintaining full employment in a slow-growth, low-growth or no-growth society. Such 'a downscaled world can be, under certain conditions, also more equitable, democratic and liveable' (Kallis 2013). In discussing these proposals, I shall not recap criticisms of them from the perspective of the economic growth paradigm but later turn towards degrowth proposals beyond waged labour.

Work time reductions

Work time reductions have gained attention from scholars understandably because of the earlier cultural expectations that increased productivity and efficiency, due to skills and technical developments, would result in less time spent at paid work. According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2022), work time reductions and job guarantees with a living wage are among the 10 most proposed degrowth policies – others being, for example, basic income and maximum income caps. Alongside socio-ecological crises, the argument for reduced time at work includes reducing the total level of production and resource use. For instance, Ferguson (2013) identifies post-growth policy instruments for reducing the impact of continuous economic growth, including reducing working hours and expanding low-productivity sectors. Over past decades Western societies have already engaged in work time reductions and maintained their relative wealth (Kallis et al. 2013). The economic and social benefits of work time reductions include increased productivity and a higher quality of life with a better work-life balance (Gunderson 2019; Kallis et al. 2013). The environmental benefits include less emissions and energy use, and a smaller ecological footprint – given that overall consumption does not increase (Gunderson 2018; Kallis et al. 2013).

In economic analyses, the form of work time reductions may not be specified and could be carried out as shorter days, weeks or years at work by taking longer holidays or retiring earlier (Kallis et al. 2013). The *four-day work week* is one popular suggestion to systematically reduce working hours. Proponents argue that right now a four-day work week may seem like a utopia, just as a five-day work week did earlier. Gerold (2021, p. 50) presents several innovative European working time models, such as legally enabling leave from work for various purposes, 'reducing the statutory or industry-specific weekly working hours, . . . extending annual holiday entitlements, or increasing the number of public holidays'. All of these include flexibility for workers. There are some empirical studies on the perception of work time reductions. Balderson et al. (2022) studied

shorter working week experiences and found that less time at work increases participants' sense of autonomy. Hanbury et al. (2023) surveyed the public support for work time reductions in Switzerland and found that respondents did not find the ecological reasoning convincing, while economic reasoning – job sharing and social aspects – were recognised.

Job sharing, job guarantee and workplace democracy

Independent of the style of work time reductions, job sharing, job guarantee and workplace democracy are introduced as complementary policy measures to ensure worker well-being in degrowth societies. *Job sharing* allows more people to work in existing jobs instead of being unemployed, enabling waged labour for a larger proportion of people. Such work sharing is topical irrespective of degrowth mentalities. While productivity gains and increased use of automation and artificial intelligence reduce the need for human labour, work time reductions would enable 'the re-employment of displaced workers via work sharing without growing the economy' (Gunderson 2019, p. 37). More permanent job sharing could result in an overall change towards lifestyles with lower socio-ecological impacts and more time spent on social relations and community work (Schor 2015).

Job guarantee as a government policy ensures jobs for all to avoid 'chronic involuntary unemployment' in capitalistic societies and to create benefits beyond merely having a job (Unti 2015). The degrowth aspect of a job guarantee is to ensure income and meaningful participation irrespective of economic growth (Unti 2015). There are experiments of guaranteed jobs, for example, in times of crisis or as social policy measures (Alcott 2013). *Workplace democracy* is suggested to be paired with work time reduction as it would allow workers to make impacts on work-related issues. On worker cooperatives and commoning as democratic forms of organisation for work, see Robra et al. (Chapter 32, this volume). Economic democracy and worker-managed organisations would result in a renewed labour movement that would decide work time reductions as a collective rather than an individual issue (Gunderson 2019).

Structural changes

Structural changes concerning *labour productivity, energy intensity, employment rates* and *support for social policies* are often discussed together. Jackson and Victor (2011) model a shift to work time reductions combined with a shift to low-productivity green sectors and show how such policies could help the United Kingdom meet its climate targets. In low-growth, slow-growth and no-growth societies there is a need to adjust labour productivity, but not at the expense of the environment, while at the same time maintaining employment for people (Jackson and Victor 2011). They state that in some sectors, such as social services, labour productivity – or the expected increase in labour productivity – is already low or even negative due to the nature of the activities. Moreover, a green service sector would have a double impact on reducing emissions; recycling, repairing and renovation reduce the need for production and shift the economies to foundational and less consuming practices (Jackson and Victor 2011). Thus, focusing employment on sectors with low- or no-labour productivity and green services is an option to reduce the impact of waged labour on ecosystems.

Hardt and colleagues (2020) studied structural changes needed for a post-growth economy and identified four groups of work in a matrix with light versus intensive sectors in energy and labour. They conclude that 'small-scale, labour-intensive production should be encouraged where feasible, while industrial, efficiency-focused production will only be pursued where it makes sense from a social and environmental perspective' (Hardt et al. 2020, p. 11). Furthermore, they call

for structural discussion on necessary production, how to reduce consumption and production, and how to identify sources for reductions in labour productivity. After all, with less mistakenly cheap and intensive fossil energy available, there is more work to be done by human labourers in some sectors due to the distribution of energy and structural changes in work processes (see, for example, Kallis 2013).

Degrowth proposals beyond waged work

Degrowth proposals beyond waged labour challenge the category of paid labour, highlight the role of unpaid work, emphasise the undervaluation of care work and suggest distinctive ways forward. I deal with these proposals in terms of freedom from waged work, basic and maximum incomes, prefigurative degrowth work, feminist and decolonial perspectives, and some political implications.

To supplement degrowth discussions on unpaid work, Nierling (2012) reviews the German 1990s labour market debates, in which the discourse of full employment was challenged by increasing unemployment due to productivity gains and structural changes. As a result, there were demands to rethink the notion of work and emphasise the importance of unpaid work as a source of social inclusion. Yet, such an approach still needs political decision-making addressing how people get by when their income is currently dependent on paid work unavailable for everyone.

André Gorz has been mentioned as one source for degrowth ideas on freedom from waged work and employment (Gollain 2016; Saave and Muraca 2021; Gerold 2021). Many have been inspired by Gorz's critique of economic growth and waged labour as the 'sole means' for people to satisfy 'their needs and integrate themselves with society', which forces them 'to undertake tasks over whose organisation and purposes they have no control' (Gollain 2016, p. 129). Gorz's suggestions include, for example, an unconditional universal social income beyond money, which contributes to political ecology with 'a mutual interplay between local projects on the ground, political means and tactics, and changes in individual culture and values' (Gollain 2016, p. 135).

Basic and maximum income

A *basic income* is a frequent topic in degrowth proposals (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022). Introducing a basic income would reduce economic insecurity, increase workers' bargaining power, and compensate currently un(der)paid work, such as care work (Alexander 2015). Resources for a basic income might be obtained by stopping subsidising ecologically harmful sectors and taxing them (Alexander 2015; Schmelzer et al. 2022). According to Liegey and Nelson (2020, p. 138), an *unconditional basic income* would provide everyone with 'money or in-kind goods and services for a decent life from birth to death'. An *unconditional autonomy allowance* proposed by the French degrowth movement emphasises the right to access democratically determined basic goods and services, such as housing, water and energy services (Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. 133–6; Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 226). A *maximum* income is suggested to radically reduce increased income equalities (Liegey and Nelson 2020, p. 140). As a result of introducing both basic and maximum incomes, societies would be radically restructured (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 225).

Prefigurative degrowth work

Degrowth work proposals can be understood as *prefigurative* when they take the form of practising or experimenting with degrowth proposals for more socially and ecologically sustainable societies in the here and now (Cooper 2020; Lazányi et al. Chapter 23, this volume). While such initiatives

necessarily function in a waged work society, they aim to model degrowth futures (Nelson 2024). To highlight a variety of prefigurative activities, I present examples from *Housing for degrowth* (Nelson and Schneider 2019) and *Food for degrowth* (Nelson and Edwards 2020). They illustrate degrowth work in practice as deliberative, meaningful, quality-oriented and convivial.

Squatting as a social and political phenomenon in Europe stems from post-war housing crisis and struggles (Cattaneo 2019). In addition to providing a social centre, the squatters economise through sharing and not paying rent (Cattaneo 2019; Verco 2019). Squatters can minimise time needed for waged work, creating time for collective activities. Long-term squatting in Christiania has enabled various practices that align with degrowth values, such as operating their own currency, material downscaling, car-free areas, workers' cooperatives and decommodification of housing (Verco 2019).

Constructing sustainable buildings has a role in reducing energy and material throughput. Vishwanath (2019) presents examples of sustainable buildings in South India that not only use local materials and reduce the ecological impact of housing but offer workers opportunities to preserve their traditional crafts. Moreover, instead of working to secure a wage to attain housing, solo or communal self-built degrowth housing can enable more sustainable dwellings. Hurlin (2019) explains how the German Mietshäuser Syndikat, a 'syndicate of tenements', challenges the growth economy by mobilising collective ownership legislation to withdraw housing from commodification. This non-profit housing model includes various practices, such as autonomous decision-making, the sharing of skills to renovate sustainably, and a solidarity fund for new projects.

Food collectively self-provisioned is another fruitful but challenging field of prefigurative degrowth practices. Strenchock (2020, p. 79) argues for giving visibility to farmers' everyday experiences in Hungary to ground discussions on transforming food systems and highlight 'the inherent risk in attempting to secure a livelihood following practices which counter industrial agriculture'. Key factors for securing rural degrowth livelihoods include places and networks for fair exchange. Radu et al. (2020, p. 173) focus on indigenous food security and discuss a case of 'how communities can re-take control over their food resources and build a local food system through local agriculture and gardening initiatives'. They emphasise the importance of 'a situated decolonial degrowth' that respects local food systems and ways to secure livelihoods (Radu et al. 2020, p. 183).

Feminist analyses of work

Feminist scholars (Susan Paulson et al. Chapter 29, this volume) show that unpaid care work is strongly gendered, partly invisible, undervalued, exploited culturally and ignored in economic thinking and policymaking (Weeks 2011; Haug 2009). Gendered work is also less visible and taken for granted in degrowth proposals (Gregoratti and Raphael 2019; Littig 2018). Thus, feminist scholars identify the pivotal role of un(der)paid and gendered labour in maintaining societies, such as voluntary, care, household and community work (Bauhardt 2014). Social reproduction is carried out predominantly by women and certain groups due to their class, ethnicity or sexuality. While much-waged work pays well even though their social and environmental impact is questionable, societally relevant care work is un(der)paid (Weeks 2011).

Littig (2018) questions 'the green job propaganda' and lack of studies on the quality of green jobs in connecting degrowth thinking to their call for a gendered analysis of sustainable work, based on the long tradition of feminist advocacy. Littig (2018, p. 574) concludes that 'sustainable work' enables a balanced mix of all kinds of work for all genders, allowing for 'a self-determined

sustainable way of life', 'guarantees . . . physical and mental health', ensures a 'secure, sufficient and fair' income, and advances 'ecologically and socially compatible production'.

Proposals beyond waged labour and focusing on gendered work identify ecofeminist approaches as a resource for challenging categories of work (Köhnke et al. 2024; Barca 2020; Gregoratti and Raphael 2019). Ecofeminist analysis highlights the polycrisis: the crisis of social reproduction, the capitalist crisis, and the skewed institutional relationships to more-than-human nature (Bauhardt 2014, p. 61). Bauhardt (2014, p. 60) shows 'how ecofeminist analysis can help to assess alternatives to the industrial mode of production and consumption and to enrich theoretical insights and policymaking processes'.

Social reproduction is an important concept for making visible undervalued and underpaid work. Undervaluing gendered (care) work has resulted in a global crisis of social reproduction (Bauhardt 2014; Barca 2019a, 2020). While culturally the focus is on paid work, which is valued higher than social reproduction, all workers, waged and unwaged, are involved to some extent in social reproduction (Barca 2019c). Many degrowth scholars highlight how unpaid work usually concerns care, which is gendered and for the most part done by women (Bauhardt 2014; Dengler and Strunk 2018; Dengler and Lang 2022). As feminist scholars have argued for decades, necessary care work is ignored in economic calculations and understandings of work, and exploited by the capitalistic order (Saave and Muraca 2021, p. 756). As a result, certain proposals centre care in degrowth economies (Dengler and Strunk 2018).

The political implications of understanding work beyond paid labour and addressing care work are tremendous. Dengler and Lang (2022, p. 1) ask how we might 'organize care in degrowth societies that call for gender justice and ecological sustainability without prioritizing one over the other'. First, the importance of labour unions is emphasised in many proposals (Barca 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Barca (2019a) calls for more attention to class, which determines people's available resources in societies. Workers are alienated from production processes and have few possibilities to decide about the production that their work enables. Barca calls for 'an emancipatory ecological class consciousness' that would enable workers to be aware of and alter social metabolism, which their work affects (Barca 2019a, p. 212).

Second, degrowth policies are needed to ensure the livelihoods of people, who are laid off due to the transition to non-fossil fuel-based production (Barca 2019c). Additionally, there are calls to provide income for unpaid care work, such as a *care income* (Barca 2020). Proposals focusing on sustaining livelihoods address feminists' observations that 'degrowth scholars have not yet taken fully into account the conditions of the global working class, which still depends chiefly on income generated through fossil-based activities' (Saave and Muraca 2021, p. 758).

Decolonial thinking

Work as a Western cultural category has invited de- and post-colonial critiques. Hanaček and colleagues (2020) reviewed degrowth literature specifically in ecological economics to find perspectives from the majority world gradually increasing but still marginal. They urge degrowth advocacy to consider perspectives *from* the majority world, where concepts such as ecological debt, have a history of influencing the field (see Ngam, Chapter 13, this volume), and identify seven significant research topics, including decolonising concepts and *ecological requirements of care work*.

Similarly concerned by Western and Northern dominance within some degrowth thinking Nirmal and Rocheleau (2019, pp. 469, 481) suggest pathways for change, encouraging 'degrowth

advocates [to] rethink their understanding of both 'nature' and 'culture' in conversation with people from intellectually, geographically and economically diverse standpoints', and to encourage degrowth attention to the 'post-extractivist world' in order to 'dismantle structures, de- and re-link global and local webs and flows, and dismantle the growth-driven elite enclaves in the global north and south'. Such themes are picked up by various contributors to this volume, especially David Barkin (Chapter 12), Roland Ngam (Chapter 13), Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (Chapter 27), and Anuna De Wever (Van Der Heyden) and Lena Hartog (Chapter 34).

Degrowth proposals rethinking the notion of work

What is entailed in rethinking notions of work when challenging the continuously exponential economic growth paradigm? Some conclude that contemporary political aims, such as full employment, are no longer doable (Littig 2018), or that, based on existential reasoning, ecological destruction is too stark to continue human activities in their current form (Soper 2020; Gomez-Baggethun 2022; Heikkurinen et al. 2019). Some degrowth proposals rethink work from a more philosophical or future-oriented position. Yet all reconsider the cultural category of work for more than just living.

Craft labour

Soper (2020, p. 6) develops the idea of *alternative hedonism* in affluent societies, which would turn away from unsustainable ways of living, such as mass consumption, and bind 'richer societies . . . to accept less expansionary, more reproductive material style of living'. Alongside the idea of post-growth living, Soper discusses work that has been hijacked to advance the economic aims of the few. They review recent developments in occidental labour markets, such as the platform economy, and 'bullshit' jobs – a term originally introduced by David Graeber (2018) – meaning time scarcity and lack of fulfilment for workers.

The concept of 'post-work' (Frayne 2015) highlights the importance of reducing working hours in paid labour and universal basic income (Soper 2020, p. 97; Gerold et al. 2023). Less work-centred societies allow people to spend more time independently and collectively and emphasise the value of craft work. Slow, artisanal ways of working can be part of 'an avant-garde, post-consumerist political imaginary' and match economic organising via 'communally owned enterprises and cooperatives' (Soper 2020, p. 104). Similarly, Vincent and Brandellero (2023) turn to craft labour, which enables autonomy and meaningful work, social connections and community, and a dialogue with materials and time. However, they remind that in capitalism, craft labourers are often in a precarious position, self-employed and often ensure continuation of their activities by negotiating prices, leading to low income and eventually enterprise shutdown. This points to the necessity of prefiguration.

Political imaginations of degrowth work

Gomez-Baggethun (2022) opens up the notion of work time by reviewing anthropological and historical evidence of work and warns against idealising past ways of working when reconsidering the notion of work. According to Gomez-Baggethun, previous thinking is either based on the idea of liberation *through* work or *from* work. In the first perspective, work is understood as convivial and meaningful activity that is part of being a human together with others. In the second perspective, time away from work is devoted to more meaningful tasks, such as political and communal

activities. Since 'the provisioning of basic needs, both material and emotional', is needed for sustaining human societies, Gomez-Baggethun (2022, p. 7) proposes 'the egalitarian distribution of minimal necessary work' among all individuals. They discuss the policy proposals, such as work time reductions, fairer rewards and work sharing, while ensuring equality among genders, racialised people and classes.

Heikkurinen and colleagues (2019) apply Hannah Arendt's notions of human activity, including action, labour and work, for considering how to achieve degrowth in terms of political change. Arendt's notion of labour refers to daily tasks that sustain vital processes and 'the activities concerning life reproduction', such as food and shelter (Heikkurinen et al. 2019, p. 557). Work refers to processes, in which humans produce or 'manufacture' more lasting outcomes, including art. In Arendt's thinking, the continuous need for labour is harnessed to serve excess consumption in modern societies resulting in significant lack of work and action devoted to politics in the public sphere. For such 'acting and speaking', structures are needed to ensure a plurality of voices and actors and to prevent 'uniformity', which may lead to totalitarianism (Heikkurinen et al. 2019, pp. 559–60). They revive *action* as a meaningful category for rethinking work in degrowth policies, in which the main aim is to reduce material and energy throughput. Heikkurinen and colleagues (2019, p. 563) call for politicising work and labour, and highlight 'the importance of labour through physical activity, such as community-supported agriculture, and work as an arena, for example, for building off-grid energy systems'. Moreover, rejecting the monetised economy and engaging in unpaid activity are important for politicising degrowth.

Mair et al. (2020, p. 2) argue for rethinking beyond work time reductions and productivity and claim that 'the most fruitful focus for research, policy, and activism towards post-growth futures is to challenge the dynamic of labour productivity growth'. Reviewing utopian writings, they highlight that 'workers desire socially useful jobs but remain locked in jobs that do not fulfil this criterion due to the threat of losing their livelihoods' (Mair et al. 2020, p. 9). Moreover, they draw from feminist analyses of capitalism and suggest that workers should have 'the ability to refuse work that is useless or in bad conditions' (Mair et al. 2020, p. 9).

The spectrum of degrowth work

Based on a scoping review, there are many proposals at the intersection of degrowth and work. The three-fold categorisation in Table 22.1 echoes Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) in categorising degrowth work research into reconceptualising work, reducing unemployment, redistributing (re)productive activities, and promoting social-ecological jobs.

Some proposals focus on one aspect of modifying the labour market, while other approaches (such as prefigurative ones) attempt to deal with many aspects together. Proposals *beyond waged labour* start from the notion that contemporary systems are cognitively and materially fixated on the centrality of *waged* work. Changes start from the fact that growth economies rely greatly on waged labour, and are gendered, racialised and geographically unevenly distributed un(der)paid labour. Proposals *rethinking the notion of work* call for a less waged and work-centred society with increased worker autonomy, such as workplace cooperatives (Ben Robra et al. Chapter 32, this volume). Work can be a means for change towards degrowth. When considering interrelated socio-ecological crises and the world of work, degrowth proposals on work are often candid and bold. At the same time, many practical proposals are tied to waged labour. Disciplinary commitments of thinkers implicitly and explicitly affect proposals, making them difficult to compare.

This scoping review brings forth several suggestions for future research. First, the vast spectrum of existing degrowth proposals on work invites degrowth advocates to consider the middle

Table 22.1 A scoping review of the spectrum of degrowth work.

	Key proposals	Key assumptions
Waged labour	Work time reductions Four-day work week Job sharing Job guarantee Workplace democracy Labour productivity Differentiating energy intensity Employment rates Supporting social policies	There are several possibilities regarding how to reduce material and energy throughput, in the contemporary world of work By modifying labour market systems, it is possible to move towards degrowth
Beyond (freedom from) waged labour	*Basic and maximum income* Restructuring societies to provide minimum support for everyone from birth to death and reduce income inequality *Prefigurative degrowth work* Modelling degrowth in ways that challenge the waged work society here and now *Feminist perspectives* Gendered analysis of sustainable work Accounting for un(der)paid work Centering and prioritising care *Decolonial thinking* Environmental global justice through resistance and communal activities Fair global division of reproductive labour Decolonising concepts of work	Contemporary systems are cognitively and materially fixated on the centrality of waged work Degrowth activities are incompatible with the waged labour system – especially *prefigurative* activities Considering system change, it is crucial to make visible and to change gendered, racialised and geographically unevenly distributed un(der) paid labour Decolonising global concepts, practices and division of labour is crucial
Rethinking the notion of work	A less work-centred society Valuing craft work Liberation through, versus from, work Reflecting Arendtian notions of action, labour and work Ability to refuse meaningless work	A less (waged) work-centred society with increased worker autonomy aligned with degrowth activities and approaches Work can be a means for change towards degrowth

ground between the following positions. While it is important to debate work conceptually and structurally, it is equally important to root thinking in grounded examples. For degrowth scholarship, this is at times challenging, because thinkers and activists experiment with ideas not yet fulfilled. Moreover, while there is research and documentation on what people do, these prefigurative activities can be criticised for lacking a clearer transformation agenda, given current structures. Studying work as a texture of practices (Gherardi 2012) is one option to join these positions. Practice theorising bridges debates between structure and agency by focusing on how things are done and by tracing practices as weaving within practice textures. Degrowth work can draw from

existing thinking on degrowth and practice theorising (Joutsenvirta 2016; Brossmann and Islar 2020) and from extensive studies on work practices in other fields.

Second, instead of treating work as a production side-issue, future research could more tightly relate to the notion of livelihoods, as in diverse economies literature, where ecological livelihoods are studied to include communal aspects of living, and more-than-human agency (Miller 2019). As in Lazányi et al. Chapter 23, this volume, and Tsagkari et al. Chapter 10, this volume, livelihoods can act as a standpoint for degrowth research and activism, showing how people get by in the face of, and supporting, systemic transformations. Conversely, Ding and Hirvilammi (2024, p. 12) urgently call for 'more research exploring labour security in the absence of environmentally harmful economic growth' and suggest a three-part model of green jobs, green skills and green compensation. For degrowth advocates this means decentring waged work in economic and systems thinking and developing income guarantees, such as basic incomes (Alexander 2015; Gerold et al. 2023).

Third, there is a need for more cross-fertilisation of degrowth research on work and social policies. Degrowth discussions on social policy and the eco-social welfare state focus on the growth dependency of social security, pension, healthcare and care work, while suggesting alternative solutions (Büchs and Koch 2017; Ding and Hirvilammi 2024). For example, Dukelow and Murphy (2022) draw from degrowth thinking to suggest decommodifying social policy. Following Dengler and Lang (2022), they suggest redistributing time differently between working and providing care and directing government-led labour market policies towards these aims. Together degrowth work and social policy research could advance debates to consider larger constellations of means for livelihoods in degrowth societies.

Fourth, there is an urgent need to integrate decolonial perspectives into degrowth work. Western thinking has dictated understandings of the economy and work, so Western thinkers and activists need to rethink notions of work, labour, livelihoods and the global division of reproductive labour, and consider majority world understandings (as in David Barkin Chapter 12, this volume).

To reconsider work, degrowth advocates must create some distance from existing, taken-for-granted understandings of work and become immersed in work conducted and experienced by everyday workers, including activists engaged experimentally in prefigurative practices. This chapter offers some pathways for the dual movement between these positions.

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23

REIMAGINING COLLABORATION

Degrowth practitioners, scholars and activists

Orsolya Lazányi, Vincent Liegey, François Schneider and Logan Strenchock

Introduction

Degrowth, a movement formed around the provocative slogan *décroissance* and an articulated set of thoughts radically criticising the growth paradigm, was born in 2002 in France. '*Décroissance*' initially became visible through activism, media, books and practice. From the start there was a distinction, even lack of cooperation, between activists who first started to use the slogan, and many intellectuals who seemed mainly active in writing, seminar and conference discussions, and constructing theoretical pillars. Yet *décroissance* did not enter academia as such until a turning point in 2008 – with the organisation of the first international degrowth scientific conference in Paris. Through the 2010s degrowth was a very active and successful field of research. The rising interest in degrowth in the 2020s within diverse sectors, from civil society to academia, signals its growing popularity. However, some members of the movement are seriously concerned by the ways degrowth's practical, and activist or intellectual, dimensions seem to have faded into the background with the strong visibility of academic actors, who appear dominant (Bunea and Garnier 2024).

This chapter is co-authored by four observers, practitioners and activists in the degrowth movement – a couple amongst its initiators. We have had privileged and influential positions in shaping the trajectory of the movement as degrowth researchers, activists, practitioners and political campaigners. François Schneider and Vincent Liegey have been key figures, especially associated with the early degrowth activism in France and its internationalisation.

François participated in the earliest discussions on degrowth, published in the first degrowth special issue of the journal *S!lence* (in 2002) and toured France advocating for *décroissance* during 2004–2005. In 2006 he founded Research & Degrowth (R&D), and initiated and co-organised the first and second degrowth conferences. Since establishing Can Decreix (Cerbère, France) in 2011 he has maintained this 'house of degrowth' as a place for degrowth practice. He has worked intermittently as a researcher and teacher in France, Austria, Estonia, and Portugal, with the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) in Catalunya, and with R&D. He has been a member of the international conference support group and co-founded the International Degrowth Network (IDN) in 2023.

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Vincent Liegey, joined the French degrowth movement in 2006, becoming a spokesperson for the Parti Pour La Décroissance, participating in Parisian bike and squat movements, and several civil disobedience actions and political campaigns, including Europe Décroissance in 2009 and the birth of the ZAD (*zone à défendre* – militant occupation, deferred development zone) in Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (France). In 2015, he co-founded the degrowth cooperative Cargonomia (Budapest) and, in 2016, co-organised the 5th International Degrowth Conference (Budapest), and joined the ongoing international conference support group.

Orsolya Lazányi and Logan Strenchock also co-founded Cargonomia. Orsolya Lazányi is an ecological economist. Her doctoral thesis involved coordinating a participatory action research process within the Cargonomia collective. She also coordinated an urban permaculture garden in Budapest. As a member of the Environmental and Social Science Research Group, also based in Budapest, she researches sustainable food systems and human nature relations. Logan Strenchock is a researcher and teacher at Central European University (Budapest). Since 2012 he has been an organic farmer at Zsámboki Biokert, a 4 ha organic fruit and vegetable market garden about 50 km from Budapest, which has been in a partnership with Cargonomia since 2014. Logan is a member of the Hungarian Agroecology Network and coordinates educational outreach activities at the Zsámboki Biokert farm.

We write this chapter collectively drawing on autoethnography, praxis and critical inquiry. Our first aim is to reveal the historic tensions between degrowth as an intellectual, academic and anti-academic movement and its more practical and activist dimensions. We live with these tensions, especially in experiences in degrowth practice at Can Decreix, in the collective and cooperative activities of Cargonomia, and also among us as the co-authors of this chapter. We analyse and draw on these experiences to suggest constructive ways forward, in advancing the chapter's second aim – to launch a formal, respectful and significant dialogue between degrowth academics and practitioners within the civic degrowth movement.

First, we examine how the initial public and media perception of degrowth – as activists who experimented-by-doing based in a radical epistemological critique of traditional academia (detailed by Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 6, this volume) – has faded in favour of a more academically oriented movement. Second, we reflect on the organisation of the degrowth movement, and suggest that deeper relationships and collaboration between research, activism and practice, could support ground-level movements and narratives by focusing on credible and robust assessments. Third, we make concrete proposals on how to reconnect academia, activism, and the politics of degrowth with practitioners in mutually beneficial, pluralistic and participatory ways, while re-embracing epistemological considerations in the formation of the original pillars of degrowth and associated challenges.

From radical critiques of academia to an 'academic movement'

Many of the ideas, imaginaries, practices and questions at the foundations of *décroissance* preceded it as a contemporary movement and a slogan. Basic principles of '*sobriété*' (moderation) and collective well-being guided cultures and traditions since homo-sapiens explored our planet. For thousands of years, human activity has depicted a capacity for thriving while consuming in balance with and embedded in nature, as a means of simplifying self-provisioning, and enabling more freedom and equality over territories of varying scales. Some archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists have shown how human communities dealt with scarcity through numerous creative and complex social organisation structures and imaginaries (Sahlins 1972; Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Central concepts such as temperance, self-implemented social and cultural limits, and voluntary simplicity or frugal abundance, are identifiable in most ancient and contemporary cultures,

traditions, spiritualities and religions. However, those vast periods of time during which complex civilisations developed and thrived without relying on competitive resource accumulation are marginalised in modern interpretations of history which, instead characterise non-capitalist societies as backward and wanting.

The intellectual origin story of *décroissance* is intrinsically linked to and inspired by historians whose work, again often ignored or marginalised, disproves the inevitability of self-centred human devolution into 'homo-economicus'. Even if *décroissance* compatible values were deeply embedded in humanity for thousands of years, it was only in the damaging overconsumption especially evident in the Global North that, in France in the early 2000s, '*décroissance*' as a political slogan and a concept was born. Later translated as 'degrowth' it quickly became a fitting slogan for a movement encouraging collective reflection on contemporary definitions of the meaning of life and, instead, promoted notions of well-being and fulfilling basic human needs within planetary boundaries.

For many years anti- or post-development ideas were discussed among a strong network of intellectuals, for instance in the group La Ligne d'Horizon, supporters of François Partant. They were influenced by a rich literature radically criticising the dominant and distorted narratives of homo-economicus as individualistic and competitive (Latouche 2016; Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume). A long tradition challenging capitalist economism includes critiques of the capitalist concept of development (Latouche 1986), the supremacy of technology (Ellul 1977) and the essentialism and centrality of markets (Polanyi 2001 [1944]), instead, rescuing the creative dimension of practice from the theoretical (Castoriadis 1975). The French anti-utilitarianism in social science movement (MAUSS) has offered radical critiques of mainstream social sciences, which are driven by positivism and quantitative beliefs and blind to a genuine qualitative and constructive understanding of human societies.

These dynamic and fruitful debates over 50 or more years have gained significance in *décroissance* activism dominated by doing and practice. Influenced by their readings of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen – whose work was translated, compiled and published as *La décroissance* (Georgescu-Roegen 1979) – ad-buster anti-car activists in Lyon, Vincent Cheynet and Bruno Clémentin, decided to launch a campaign for *décroissance* in the French ad-buster magazine *Casseur de Pub*. They then met with academics and intellectuals from the Global South and North, who were linked by a radical critique of imperialist notions of development. In 2002, a collective effort resulted in an influential special edition of the monthly *S!lence* on sustainable and convivial *décroissance*. This was followed with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 'Défaire le développement, refaire le monde' gathering co-organised by La Ligne d'Horizon les amis de François Partant. From its inception highly dynamic and rooted in activism, politics and practice, the new movement emerged (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume).

During the spring of 2002, Pierre Rabhi, a well-known proponent of agroecology supporting *décroissance*, attempted to become candidate in the French presidential election. Civil disobedience was organised against car races, advertisements, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The movement was framed by collective notions of targeted *décroissance*, free meals in the streets, bicycle-oriented car-free demonstrations. Such grassroots activity was guided by and linked to degrowth as a concept-cum-practice. *Décroissance* became the slogan for campaigns, articulating a desire to encourage a re-examination of our imaginaries, linked with ideas and cooperative models of numerous existing social movements such as alter-globalisation.

In 2004–2005 François Schneider, a researcher questioning the orientation of institutional academia, a self-described '*objecteur de croissance*' (an objector to growth), led a march ultimately

joined by hundreds of participants, mostly practitioners, engaging with citizens from village to village, encouraging open dialogues on degrowth. This march was exemplary of academic intellectuals practising degrowth, beyond intellectualising and giving speeches – walking in the mud with donkeys, meeting people – showing incredible strength of purpose. Organisers of degrowth seminars in Thiviers in 2004 were blindsided by the journalist's and public's interest in the grounded activism of the 'barefoot' researcher–practitioner. Even the French secret intelligence was concerned by such interventions promoting degrowth within the general public whereas degrowth seminars seemed completely harmless.

In 2006, le Parti pour la Décroissance (Degrowth Party) was founded. In 2009, degrowth networks participated in the European elections and played a central role in the birth of the Notre-Dame-Des-Landes ZAD. Ideas of 'open relocalisation' developed along with solidarity actions with other like-movements, such as local (alternative) currency networks, transition towns, ecovillages, community gardens, incredible edible, AMAPs (Community Supported Agriculture Programmes), repair cafés and do-it-yourself (DIY) bike shops. Actions were associated with civil disobedience, flashmobs, and demonstrations, and dialogues with left, green parties and associations.

In short, the early years of *décroissance* were dominated by activism and practice even if intellectual figures, such as Paul Ariès and Serge Latouche, were prominent in public and media spheres. Like Gilbert Rist, among others, they had advocated for using other descriptors and concepts such as post-development but became convinced to adopt *décroissance*. They became significant theoretical supporters, bringing on board a rich academic epistemological critique of the rising dominance of positivism and economicism. The association Sciences Citoyennes questioned the limits of research and innovation in the context of anti-GMO, anti-nano-technologies and anti-nuclear movements. They advocated for citizens to reappropriate science and choices of technology through expert-informed deliberation that was transparent, inclusive and democratic. This pointed towards a construction of knowledge, involving research, which should be democratic, inclusive, participatory and transdisciplinary.

While cooperation over thinking and doing within the movement has always been necessary, it has never been easy. The first emerging public figures speaking about *décroissance* theorised while the lesser known or forgotten majority were active as philosopher-artisans and philosopher-practitioners. The first spoke and wrote in the name of the movement, while others experimented daily, sometimes irreverently with respect to their self-designing theoretical masters. The main challenge here has been that *people engaging in practice usually do not have either the time or the motivation to write*, and in general do not have the skills developed by someone whose profession involves writing. To publish academic work is highly demanding in terms of time, effort and energy and is often incompatible with the daily struggles of experimentation, activism and resistance. But, *intellectuals often lack the skills and know-how of basic practices*. More significantly, they can appear reluctant to be practical and resistant to grassroots feedback. Consequently, intellectual separation from experimentation can be seen to reduce the quality and relevance of intellectual ideas.

Some in academia refer to themselves as 'activist scholars' because they approach their research more as a service to the movement, adopting complementary research methods (as in Nelson and Liegey, Chapter 35, this volume). Many are critical of mainstream academic frameworks but still consider themselves serious scholars. Indeed, all the co-authors in this chapter have engaged in independent intellectual and scholarly activities, including research. So the tensions here have been experienced personally as well as observed.

From *décroissance* to degrowth

In this early history of *décroissance* tensions between more practical activists and degrowth academics and independent intellectuals revealed gaps that could be observed even as dialogue and cooperation ensued. A lot of discussion and experimentation took place with respect to how to fulfil basic needs in sustainable and convivial ways, including changes in political relations and practices of power, self-organisation, horizontal governance, gender balance, decolonialism, direct democracy, reciprocity, the gift economy, and the practical know-how of low-tech, permaculture and agroecology. Unfortunately, most of this experimentation, whether successful or not, went undocumented and was not integrated into analysis. Theory was generic and inspired practice but not much *reflexive praxis* by activists and scholars took place.

In 2006, after a series of interventions in scientific seminars, R&D was founded in order to explore, analyse and document these fruitful experiences. *Décroissance* was translated into English and entered as such in the academic literature. The first peer-reviewed academic articles were published in well-established scientific journals, formalising 'degrowth' in English. In 2008 R&D France – represented by Francois Schneider, Denis Bayon and Fabrice Flipo – organised the first international degrowth academic conference in Paris. It was highly successful and followed by others to become an institution.

If people are better connected and influential, how they use their privileged positions is a key question. They can act in self-interested ways to enhance their position, power and prestige. Or, they can give voice to others and support otherwise invisible or easily dismissed ideas. In promoting degrowth academic conferences, François Schneider took a bet – using his networks within academic fields such as ecological economics, substance flow analysis and life cycle assessments – to give visibility and credibility to degrowth, and give it scientific recognition. The strategy was to attract lots of experience and knowledge into this area while offering the rich epistemological thoughts already discussed within intellectual degrowth circles. The challenge, of course, was to do so in ways that highlighted and reinforced activism and practice that could be enriched by different analytical perspectives through academic research. The hope was that others would use their networks to promote degrowth into many areas, including agriculture, general education, health and so on.

For two main reasons, this strategy was strongly criticised by some French academic and non-academic degrowth intellectuals, especially Serge Latouche, and poet Jean-Claude Besson-Girard (director of Paragon publishing house, printing many books on degrowth and the international and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed open access journal *Entropia*, which presented theoretical and political reviews on degrowth). Their first objection suggested that the translation of *décroissance* into English carried the risk of losing some of its original radical and anthropological substance, often referred to as a 'cultural' approach (Schneider et al. 2010, pp. 511–3). Their fear – which could be challenged as illegitimate from the point of view of upholding diversity – was realised, as outlined by Jarrige and Liegey (Chapter 5, this volume) and Fitzpatrick (Chapter 11, this volume). *Décroissance* was translated relatively easily into other Latin languages – Spanish (*decrecimiento),* Catalan (*decreixment*) and Italian (*decrescita*). However, as outlined with respect to Italy in Karl Krähmer et al. (Chapter 6, this volume) and by Nogué Algueró and D'Alisa regarding Catalunya (Chapter 8, this volume) the interpretive results were mixed as the movement spread in new cultures.

The second objection of Latouche, Besson-Girard and others was associated with an aligned epistemological risk – of creating an *economistic academic* degrowth field which might kill its

'creative and radical origins' tied to emancipating itself from utilitarianism. While they seemed to ignore the more diverse sources of degrowth, their concerns were perceptive. Academia can be highly normative in imposing mainstream research frames and demanding constraints; journals and publishers require manuscripts by degrowth tendencies to conform by responding to mainstream review. Still there had been few academic articles published even in French on degrowth, so the promotional strategy ended up being implemented through a series of academic conferences.

The 2nd International Degrowth Conference was organised in Barcelona in 2010 and was even more of a success (Nogué Algueró and D'Alisa, Chapter 8, this volume). The aim was to bring together a large diversity of actors, ultimately fulfilled by numerous and various activists, scientists, artists, practitioners, journalists, politicians and citizens. There was an amazing collective process of designing degrowth policy proposals and research areas of degrowth. After this conference, a support group was set up to follow up with more degrowth conferences, to share their formative experience and networks, and to maintain as much as possible a balance between academic and other dimensions of degrowth.

This involvement of different actors was achieved by successive degrowth conferences – in 2012, one in Venice (Italy), and another in Montreal (Canada) – the 1st degrowth conference in the Americas; in Leipzig (Germany) in 2014; and Budapest in 2016 – all-embracing activists, artists and practitioners. But the latter actors became marginalised with the increasingly academic leadership and format. Moreover, the initial impetus to have academics document and reflect on degrowth did not happen much in practice. Yet, the strategy to attract academic recognition to give degrowth visibility and legitimacy did pay off. The credibility degrowth gained was significant.

In 2018, to offer more balance, it was decided to host three complementary events. The 6th International Degrowth Conference in Malmö (Sweden) highlighted the tradition of encouraging as great a diversity of actors as possible. There was a much more political forum at the European Parliament (Nelson and Liegey, Chapter 1, this volume), and a significant First North-South Conference on Degrowth: Decolonizing the Social Imaginary conference in Mexico City focusing on North–South dialogues. Efforts were made to maintain strong connections and dialogue with political, activist and institutional organisations where degrowth values, principles and visions were influential.

But the degrowth movement was restrained by economic realities, pragmatically appropriating an academic conference framework as a window of opportunity to fund and organise large inclusive degrowth gatherings through registration fees and access to university facilities. It is a Robin Hood model, consistently financing less-resourced non-academic members of the movement, redistributing the surplus for greater inclusivity but at the cost of academic expectations. Moreover, even as more academics face precarious work terms and conditions, their situation is perceived as more comfortable than those of activists and practitioners. While academia has its codes and constraints, the movement risks normative steps by stealth that threaten to enclose, reduce or contort the messages and directions of degrowth and divorce it from 'reality'. While many young degrowth activists find opportunities to avoid a 'bullshit' job and time to devote to degrowth, say through a subsidised PhD thesis or research grant or position, others do not.

Degrowth activists entering academia take other rarely discussed risks. Academia and research undoubtedly offer wider understandings of the world, including social, political and ecological processes, dynamics and interactions. Research has a role in developing theories which help us to look at problems through different lenses. Indeed, certain early academic articles published about degrowth (such as Demaria et al. 2013) laid out some of its premises and fundamental concepts such as post-development, conviviality, autonomy, open relocalisation and commons, which have been essential to establishing the degrowth movement.

However, degrowth research in the 2020s tends to focus on applying conventional academic approaches and methods, such as disciplinary analyses eschewing broader interdisciplinary or novel paradigms. This is due to the prevailing research paradigms and practices (dominated by positivist and colonial approaches), and academic emphases on outputs by way of journal articles. The number of degrowth reviews and analyses of the results of peer-reviewed scientific publications is increasing. Academic publishers focus on their prestige within the university sector, competing for narrow audiences, with high subscriptions and open access publication fees often resulting in a limited focus on, for instance, 'scientifically valid' results irrespective of, say, the practical necessity for diverse real-life degrowth prefigurative experimentation. From the point of view of the movement, some of this work can be considered as constructive self-analysis but other work is of dubious merit for practitioners, campaigners and activists. Moreover, it is frustrating for them to take part in conferences – that offer rare opportunities for large gatherings of movement members to interact – if most sessions seem to be too abstract compared to their lived experience and daily struggles.

Still, degrowth and other like, and aligned, movements envisage a just society based on democratic processes and institutions with much more justice and participation – all of which ought to be reflected within knowledge production processes. While current mainstream research prioritises researchers as if objective observers, seen to be separate from their life worlds and practices, more researchers are applying appropriate methods, such as action research and other participatory processes, sensitive to ethical issues and seeking to serve stakeholders' interests. Yet large research institutions attract the most funding, and most researchers are still under pressure to research in certain ways and to publish only in certain outlets. In this paradigm trained researchers create approaches to knowledge and associated skills. Like all workers they have masters and however much researchers are personally concerned about their subjects or and about ethical questions, knowledge production and prioritised skills are formed in competition in a sector that remains monopolised (Nelson and Leahy 2024). Certain intellectuals and institutions form an elite, dismissing, even silencing and making certain parts of society invisible. This might not be conscious, but knowledge serves those in power.

Mobilising academics and practitioners

Clearly, the time is ripe to explore how to reconnect academic skills and knowledge with real-life practice and to engage with practitioners experimenting with degrowth. The co-authors of this chapter set aside time to discuss proposals in this direction by reflecting on their own experience, work, observation and learning. We aim to illustrate through the trajectory of Can Decreix and Cargonomia, how practice and theory can be connected in meaningful ways. Based on the co-authors' extensive experiences – participation in practical collectives, organising degrowth conferences, political activism, engagement with other degrowth movement participants, research, teaching and academic writing – a short list of recommendations for working to bring degrowth theory and practise closer together has evolved. This list, further below, relies on our experiences as advocate-researcher-organisers, acknowledging a self-responsibility in relation to our work, research, volunteering and related projects.

Reimagining the practice of degrowth research

We urge a reimagining of degrowth research as a genuine collaboration between researchers and practitioners, in the vein of participatory action research, militant research, professional research,

communities of practice and much more, still to be explored. We need to identify ways to increase intimate and grounded practice-based interaction between researchers and practitioners. In particular, we need to address the current imbalance within most research projects where academics involved receive an income for such time and effort, while practitioners regularly volunteer their time and effort (for instance, as interviewees, case study 'subjects', workshop participants). Often practitioners feel exploited in such research or, perversely, only superficially referred to sometimes out of 'respect' for their volunteer status. Research goals can be seen as irrelevant or too abstract compared to their everyday life and struggles. Such relations have been addressed by certain researchers, especially in social science fields, by integrating those with life experience into paid research teams as co-designers, co-organisers and co-workers in ways that influence the intentions, collaborative relationships and related goals of projects or, alternatively, by remunerating interaction on an hourly basis. Research articles can also be co-written. This allows practitioners to have equal status, negotiate their research/non-research schedules more rationally, and fully offer their knowledge while encouraging working relationships that result in mutual benefits.

Although it is an achievement for degrowth researchers to receive more public and private funding, that has often been seen as contorting the power relationship between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners are used as *subjects/objects* – rather than being integrated respectfully as intelligent *agents*. The participation of practitioners at the onset of the brainstorming stages of research projects is essential to ensure that the goals have tangible impacts for empowering degrowth in practice and, conversely, achieve high-quality research. Research funds should incorporate a component for greatly needed financial support to fledgling alternative initiatives with meagre tangible financial resources. In short, academic and industry pilot projects provide a model which could be easily adopted and adapted.

A fulsome inclusion of practitioners compensated as team members in research projects would have the additional benefit of formal collaborations, enriching and even entwining academic and practitioners' perspectives. The time researchers might spend physically interacting with practitioner networks in the field, even experiencing practical fieldwork, could provide unique emancipatory insights to researchers, positively influencing the trajectory of projects and enabling more accurate depictions of real challenges to transitionary pathways. Academics can deepen their learning by experiencing, doing, as they contribute to practical tasks. (Strenchock 2021; Pixová et al. 2024). Various research approaches, from ethnographic to participatory ones, allow researchers to engage with practical work.

As practitioners we contest much of the elite disciplinary language used in research applications and findings, as well as many methods of academic research driven by positivist approaches. A holistic degrowth transformative approach demands, on the one hand, that academics challenge their workplaces and enlighten researchers with emancipatory practices. Such approaches are increasingly succeeding in being funded, but many models, such as 'living labs' are still struggling with inherited patronising and economistic roles. Such models often involve commercial industry and have a template wherein researchers have 'objective' power and roles (Bulkeley et al. 2019; Saad and Agogué 2024). Meanwhile practitioner-participants are frequently frustrated in finding, understanding and applying theories and analytical frameworks in their everyday life, ultimately feeling that research as such seems useless.

Therefore, while funding is an important ingredient to provide equal opportunities for everybody in research, the inclusivity of knowledge production should be addressed at a much deeper level. Radical participatory approaches address power relations within the knowledge production process (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Questioning the mainstream hegemony and privileged position of scientists in knowledge creation, all participants become co-researchers in democratic

knowledge creation processes. Furthermore, their real-world research calls for action. Participatory action research moves away from the idea that research is limited to observing reality and that the researcher is an objective outsider (Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1997). Participatory action research aims to change social practices and habits, and to support communities advocate for change, and even to transform systems. This approach allows researchers to take responsibility for current social, political or ecological issues (Reason and Bradbury 2001).

At the same time, the process of participatory action research ensures that theory is grounded in experience. By definition, it aims to solve problems sourced within practice (Heron and Reason 1997). Furthermore, a participatory and action-oriented paradigm seeks to empower problem holders by giving them the tools normally reserved for trained researchers, and to re-define what useful knowledge is – from peer-reviewed journal articles with limited access and complex language to knowledge embedded in practice and shared by co-researcher practitioners – and for whom it exists (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Nevertheless, this approach requires practitioners to be engaged, to be prepared to self-analyse, reflect on their goals and achievements, and even theorise over the challenges and conflicts within their operational activities. To illustrate these points we discuss how participatory action research was implemented cooperatively within the Cargonomia collective.

Researching Cargonomia

Cargonomia (Budapest, Hungary) is a self-organised, open collective focusing on activities associated with urban sustainability, organic farming, organic gardening education, bicycle mobility, degrowth in practice, community activism for more liveable cities, and self-sufficient living (Figure 23.1). The self-organised collective's trajectory has been greatly influenced by its urban context, local opportunities and its co-founders' personal interests and involvement in degrowth. Three co-authors have been very active founding members of Cargonomia.

Figure 23.1 Logan and Cargonomia trainees Perrine and Enora remove weeds in a vegetable plot with oscillating hoes at Zsámboki Biokert. Photograph by Noemi Bulecza.

The cooperative's various activities are accompanied by continuous discussions, shared readings, and reflections among members, and practice is constantly assessed by reference to degrowth principles and values. Practice is embedded in a number of Cargonomia's core internal and public activities, which include direct collaboration with an active organic farm, experiments with their own ecological building project, implementing various forms of bicycle mobility pedagogy, and curating a traineeship program introducing participants to hands-on activities directly. This is a great challenge to members, whose time and energy is exhausted by mandatory practical, organisational and networking activities. Still, everyday struggles in the collective's operation require reflection on the social, economic and political context in which the collective is embedded.

Participatory action research in Cargonomia

Members of Cargonomia engaged in a participatory action research process (2016–2018) within the framework of a doctoral research project conducted by one of its founding members (Lazányi 2022). The participatory action research process was a collective learning process and analytical work which allowed us to reflect on practices in the light of degrowth theory and to critically review our actions, achievements and challenges. Research questions emerged around two dilemmas in particular:

- *How might we appropriately integrate the ecological aspects of our operation within our economic and educational activities*?
- *How might we navigate challenges posed by the dominating growth-oriented economic system to limit compromises?*

The action research process was characterised by cycles of planning-acting-reflecting in which all members of Cargonomia became active as co-researchers. One cycle was followed by another one, iteratively building on one another. This cyclical process provides the framework for participatory action research. Planning and action phases related to the mission of the collective via its grounded activities – such as outreach events, use of cargo bikes, and the development of a cargo bike sharing system.

Co-researchers collected data methodically through observation, field notes, interviews and research diaries. Following these activities, during joint discussions, co-researchers reflected on these tasks in terms of degrowth theories, principles and values. Reflecting on actions, achievements and on lived experience is a crucial aspect of participatory action research processes. It allows co-researchers to critically review results, processes and challenges. It can reveal issues which otherwise would remain hidden, and aims to ensure the research is valid.

In the reflection phase, critical questions focused our attention on each activity in terms of these topics and dilemmas:

- How far does this activity respect the ecological and social limits to growth?
- In which ways does this activity create independence from the surrounding growth-oriented economic system?
- What kind of technology(ies) are being used, and what are their role(s) in this activity?
- What are the main resources used in this activity?
- What is the underlying logic of the interactions with partners?
- How are the decisions being made?

While the questions and directions of the participatory action research was a continuously emerging process, some key points were learned.

It is clear that Cargonomia is actively trying to move away from the growth-oriented system and creating an alternative economic model based on degrowth philosophy and principles. The collective prioritises reciprocal and solidarity relations with its partners and community members value solidarity and reciprocity over market-based exchange. Without the pressure of maximising profit and following the substantive understanding of the economy of Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), a plural economic model is developing, which allows the collective greater scope to comply with ecological criteria. Some examples follow. The group has established and maintains a functioning public commons cargo bike sharing system. While eschewing scale-incentivised development pathways, cargo bicycle mobility has expanded to thousands of citizens. Cargonomia is collectively renovating an adobe house. Volunteers join an annual supervised construction camp to help develop Cargonomia's community house and benefit by learning traditional architectural techniques with natural materials.

However, ecological criteria and societal considerations continuously present the collective with operational challenges and contradictions. How can we make organic, local vegetables more widely available across social classes? Should we encourage people to use electric cargo bikes when electric batteries are environmentally harmful? How many carbon emissions do we create travelling to international conferences? While we compromise, we recognise the importance of making these dilemmas explicit. Discussions and debates assist us in identifying partial solutions. Yet, many contradictions relate to systemic social and political contexts. For instance, as long as agro-industries are supported by subsidies and use chemical fertilisers and sprays, and sophisticated technology, food produced by such carbon-intensive agriculture is more affordable for low-income communities than products from our organic farm (Strenchock 2021).

Our high level of activity and public outreach prevents us generating greater income. Individual members of Cargonomia apply diversified practices to fulfil personal needs. Beyond monetary income from paid work, members gain material and in-kind resources through Cargonomia to contribute to their well-being. They do not identify as volunteers; their 'lifestyle' connects them to their community. Personal relations, the knowledge acquired, networks, opportunities to carry out meaningful activities, and the conviviality achieved all contribute to a 'good life'. Consequently members gain various advantages, while strategically increasing their independence from the growth-oriented economy.

The research process felt very different – slow and ineffective – compared to the dynamic, practice-oriented reality of the collective. Still, participatory action research pushed us to learn new aspects about our activities and ourselves, to critically review our actions and conceptualise 'reality' in new ways. This is particularly important for degrowth-inspired initiatives. 'Degrowthers' seek to imagine new forms of social relations and organisation but developing such processes is time- and energy-consuming. If ambitious prefigurative projects were acknowledged as pilot research projects, and financially supported as such, they might generate significant research outcomes. Transformative projects are necessarily anti-systemic. A key learning is that growth economies strangulate all efforts to live counter its constraints.

Researching Can Decreix

Can Decreix (2011–) has offered life experiences for researchers in a practical low-tech degrowth ecosystem (Schneider 2022). Can Decreix evolved from discussions about car free ecovillages in a car free cities group established prior to us discovering degrowth. The launch of a car buster network and the march for degrowth inspired intense discussions about a demonstration site for

degrowth practices. Finally, R&D's Filka Sekulova and François Schneider launched Can Decreix ('house of degrowth' in Catalan) on the French–Spanish border, one of the few eco-projects foregrounding degrowth as and in practice (Can Decreix 2024).

We feared becoming simply a vacation site for intellectuals and urbanites. So we consciously decided on a site close to a train station with syndicalist issues (including neoliberal closures of long-distance services) and near a border embroiled in migration control. Three old houses on a steep hill, an abandoned honey farm, vineyard and peddler house, overlook the Cerbère station. This site did not offer a leisurely natural environment. Our motto was to 'deal with limits but challenge borders' and to encourage the 'transformation of fruits and societies', with a rural project that 'refuses to conquer new virgin territories'. There are 6 ha of terrain perfect for low-tech encounters and activities within small houses and ruins and a little arena. We radically adapted to our surrounding conditions with a radically preventive approach.

People came for summers of collective wall plastering with local clay. We got rid of vehicular access, TV antennas, electric heaters, water toilets and fridges. We set up compost toilets and a collective washing station and slowly created a more coherent degrowth low-tech ecosystem. We built solar ovens, rocket stoves, grey water irrigation to plants, and transformed the collective washing station into several generations of pedal washing machines. We slowly improved each system based on feedback from usage. We improved our social relations with and operation of the tools. Can Decreix is a place not only where we design and develop new ways of doing things and disseminate information about them but also live with low-technologies 24/7, testing them coherently over the long term in integrated ways.

A massive problem with mainstream research, including much degrowth research, is analysing tiny changes to current lifestyles, mainly limited to societal studies and hypothesising. In Can Decreix we have worked to create a holistic low-tech ecosystem. Rather than working in 'silos' we define and delegate transformative roles and models concerned with cascades of resources, different types of recycled materials, managing flows of natural elements, and caring for humans and other animals and plants. Figure 23.2 shows a 'wood cascade'. Wood

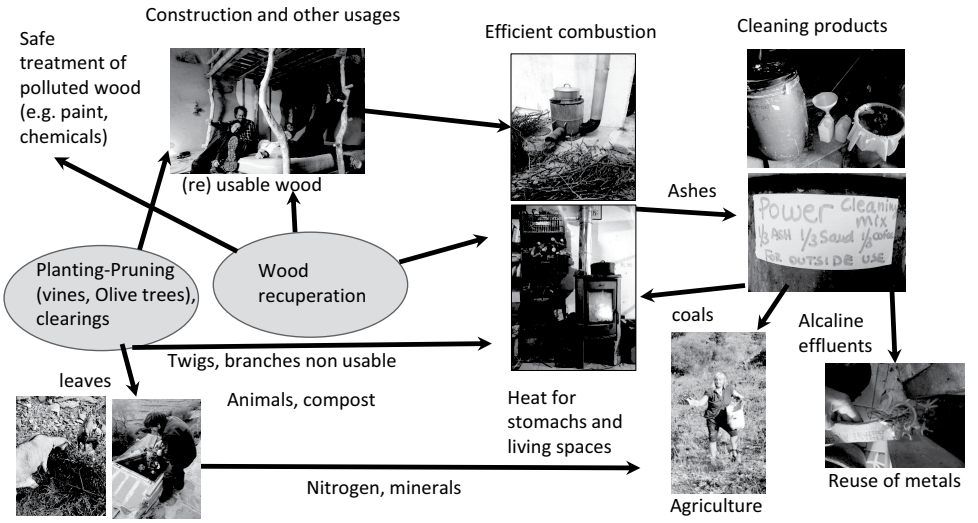

Figure 23.2 The wood cascade at Can Decreix. Credit: François Schneider.

otherwise burned in the open-air (wasting heat) is used for construction or making wooden objects. So-called unusable agricultural wood or waste wood (without chemicals) is used for efficient cooking and heating in slow combustion stoves. Ashes are recycled to make ash water, used for cleaning and irrigation, and to reduce soil acidity. Some leaves and small branches are composted or used as mulch.

Can Decreix has offered an immersive life-experience for researchers via one-off events, in organised activities for degrowth master's students and participants of degrowth summer schools, which included intense training, scenario and role playing. Since 2014, numerous degrowth apprentices, interns, activists and writers as well as WWOOFs ('willing workers on organic farms') have passed through Can Decreix. More recently the demonstration site has enabled degrowth master's students to dive into degrowth, creating a wonderful welcoming and convivial atmosphere for students, scholars and training practitioners.

In the past decade Can Decreix regularly hosted 5–10 mainly short-term inhabitants either as individuals or in groups, and sometimes for several months at a time. It is the base for R&D France, Cerbère-Cactus, and an association of train users. In 2024 we linked to a locally emerging low-tech lab and are establishing an agricultural project for investigating in transformative ways with new local plants, especially cactus. Until recently our posture has not appealed to many mature degrowth researchers except to curious short-term visitors wanting a little bit of hands-on practice. It has been more attractive to young researchers with open minds and a variety of intellectuals and practitioners, engineers and creative people. Consequently, we are still far from integrating academic research and practice.

Can Decreix has received very little support from academia; few academics have asked for our feedback. However, this has enabled us to develop without external pressures and in the last couple of years, a growing number of students have come to Can Decreix to do projects. Can Decreix is in the countryside while, in parallel, a project of low-tech degrowth practice is being developed by us in a urban context near Paris. Our Can Decreix eco-space enables us to run hypotheticals, scenarios and role plays. We offer spaces not only for low-tech and biological experiments but also for organisational and cultural experimentation (Vetter and Fersterer, Chapter 11, this volume), including potential degrowth experimentation in autonomous processes for everyday living (Sitrin, Chapter 4, this volume).

Future degrowth conferences: inclusivity

International and regional degrowth conferences offer opportunities for newcomers and established members of the degrowth movement to experience degrowth immersion over several days of talks, creative activities and workshops. Conferences embrace a wide range of disciplines and integrate the local and regional culture in situ in degrowth forms of conviviality and sustainability. However, the active and formal participation of the growing base of practitioners should be encouraged within conference programming to showcase and focus attention on prefigurative and other practical models. Such models provide opportunities for novice degrowthers to experience degrowth practices and engage with existing practitioners beyond conferences.

Currently, conference and network organisers endure pressures to ensure that conferences, seminars, sanctioned academic courses and related programming, achieve credibility within frameworks of international higher education and scientific research communities. But they risk becoming an elitist community of 'academocrats' who have lost touch with grassroot practitioner movements. The nature of conference organisation, largely funded and facilitated by university academics negotiating the use of impressive spaces, has shifted participation overwhelmingly towards

student-researcher participants in recent years. *We recommend reintegrating practitioner-activists as a priority in future conference programming*.

As announced in the opening of the 10th International Degrowth Conference in 2024 in Pontevedra, in 2027 a new format for international degrowth conferences will be trialled, aiming to emancipate the movement from the constraints of academic frameworks without losing our academic networks or excellency. Many participatory formats exist to challenge typical academic sessions consisting of individual presentations, often allowing very limited time for discussion and cooperation. Participatory workshops – using 'fish-bowl' methods, role games, world cafés and more – involve audience–participants and collaborative work. Creativity should go beyond Western societies' dominant communication through verbal and printed expression to involve other senses, and even emotions, to fruitfully diversify conference participants' experiences and, indeed, opening novel aspects for researchers. Art and artists should play an important role in conferences, as was successfully experienced during the 5th International Degrowth Conference in Budapest in 2016 (among others).

There is the risk of losing academic support and communities, which might, in turn, become more esoteric and misrepresent degrowth in their theoretical content and methods. However, possibilities for strategic alliances with like-minded networks, including academic ones, might well allow and encourage greater diversity of membership within the movement. Communities contributing to organising degrowth conferences have an impressive track record of collective action for communal benefit. Veterans in conference organising, still active participants in the IDN and scholarly researchers have strong networks and capabilities to expand links with practitioner support networks in degrowth and aligned movements.

Although increasing the impact of alternative agricultural communities has been a widely referenced 'allied goal' within degrowth, conference programming and quips found in the "what can degrowth look like" portions of scholarly research, a wide gap exists between degrowth scholars and agricultural practitioner movements. In the European context, most countries in the EU official and self-organised networks for agroecology, regenerative organic agriculture and permaculture exist with varying levels of formalisation, structural support and political representation. Sustainable agriculture, and the protection of the right to pursue agrarian livelihoods which preserve and enhance cultural, natural and social ecosystems, have concrete demands which, adapted to a holistic degrowth approach, offer ways to spread in reach and scope in the future. Collaboration with such networks and projects would support opportunities for citizens of the future to thrive in good health, while earning a living in tune with natural ecosystems (Nelson and Edwards 2020).

There is greater opportunity for constructive engagement between degrowth and agricultural transition movements. Recent literature has further explored the potential of collaborations between degrowth advocates and agriculturalists, while outlining pathways for collective organising in solidarity with diverse stakeholder groups (Pixová et al. 2024; Guerrero et al. 2023; Ujj and Bálint 2020). The potential of systemic cross-disciplinary collaborations between degrowth advocates and agroecology actors is only one example of synergistic, transdisciplinary collaboration, which could result in parallel benefits for all parties involved. We can collectively imagine a future where scholars' poetic visions of the future are enhanced with the stark reality of peasant wisdom, while consecutively supporting a maturation of agricultural transition narratives to be empowered with the tools of a political economy approach to strategy formulation. Such connections with low-tech or DIY, transition and ecovillage networks can also be maintained and reinforced.

Degrowth and practice-based training programs

The establishment of two ICTA-UAB master's degree courses in degrowth in 2019 and in 2021 (D'Alisa et al. 2023) and other degrowth-focused higher education study programs in Europe and North America all legitimise growth-agnostic intellectual exploration (see too, Prádanos, Chapter 21, this volume). These courses include talks, readings and workshops by practitioners. However, the costs and selective nature of such programs exclude many, especially more practice-oriented, youth who seek alternatives to entrapment within growth-centred work and study. The limited amount of academic and continuing educational programs on degrowth do not properly serve this wide audience. Ideally, mainstream academic institutions would, but very few do. This is where in situ, well-organised and robust practice-based training courses blending practice with theory but with practice a priority could play a significant role.

At the 9th International Degrowth Conference (2023) in Zagreb, a focused practitioner working group was informally convened and later officially recognised as a working group within the IDN, but progress has been limited by lack of institutional and financial support and time. A one-week post-conference volunteer camp with an emphasis on practical skill building and convivial exchange was organised to follow the International Degrowth and European Society for Ecological Economics Conference held in Pontevedra (Spain) in June 2024. Participants in the 'practice' work group continue to exchange with one another in monthly online sessions, while multiple members submitted concepts for interactive open workshops to be convened at the combined 18th Conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics and the 11th International Degrowth Conference scheduled for mid-2025 in Oslo. A tangible outcome of the international conference format is an increased level of activity of working groups who communicate regularly leading up to the conference and engage in face-to-face interaction throughout. We recommend building on the knowledge and contact base of the IDN resources to promote and develop opportunities for structured, practice-based degrowth pedagogy and continuing education, drawing on curating a functional network for practical learning composed of degrowth practitioners assisted by academic and organisational allies. Collective effort is required to focus on identifying and defining existing (and later potential) alternative initiatives with the capacity to host learners, document learning opportunities offered, assess the conditions for learning exchange, and provide a flexible pedagogical structure. A method for determining what type of organisations and what activities are compatible with degrowth would need to be established (Prádanos, Chapter 21, this volume). It would be critical to maintain fair power structures, rotating positions and non-hierarchical decision-making processes to avoid an elitist or 'practocratic' controlling and certifying body selecting 'worthy' practitioner hosts, specific and narrow pedagogical approaches and references (Leahy 2021, pp. 69–71, 194–6). Alternative economic models should be created based, as much as possible, on commons and non-monetary cooperation.

Traineeships

Ideally, open universities of degrowth, with theory and practice should be accessible to all, in numerous languages on various topics and at introductory through to advanced levels. Cargonomia is trying to open such pathways through an ambitious traineeship programme launched in 2015 into which have welcomed more than 70 students. It has mainly attracted international students who typically spend a period of three to six months immersed in the cooperative's work. Their activities cover intellectual theory and physical hands-on work.

Figure 23.3 Logan and Cargonomia trainees Melen, Aymeric, Paco and Nicholas offer vegetables from the Cargonomia study garden at a market in Budapest. Photograph credit: Cargonomia.

Interns participate in Cargonomia's urban outreach activities – workshops, discussions, public events. They learn about and analyse degrowth and related narratives. They devote time examining specific practical details with team supervisors. They assist with distributing weekly organic vegetable boxes from the farm, with the cargo bike sharing system, spend time at a community bicycle-kitchen partner (Cyclonomia) learning about self-sufficient bike repairing, or participating in various civic activities within the extended Cargonomia network active in Budapest (Figure 23.3). They volunteer at least two full days each week at the organic farm and in Cargonomia's study garden in the same village supervised by the farm team. Such trainees reinforce collaboration with Cargonomia's organic farm partner Zsámboki Biokert which, in turn, supports knowledge exchange around the social, financial and structural challenges of maintaining a functioning alternative farm model with strong social and environmental ambitions all the while embedded within globalised and extractivist agricultural structures (Strenchock 2021).

Narratives of degrowth and Cargonomia's experiments with agroecology, community organisation and the application of appropriate technology have attracted students from varying disciplines, including political sciences, international relations and sustainable tourism studies. Initially, engineering students had most frequently begun to question their current and future roles as engineers in contemporary society (Gaillard and François 2019). Usually, they have come from French grand écoles, where a more favourable environment for student mobility exists and the likelihood of previous non-institutional exposure to degrowth is higher. Also, students enrolled in international master's degree programs in Hungarian or Czech universities have come in search of practice-based case studies for theses. Several students have elaborated their thesis and final project works based on internship experiences, including topics such as examining the role of engineers in contemporary society, the applications of appropriate technology, providing technical solutions to on-farm challenges, or work in Cargonomia's own study garden. Therefore, the traineeship program contributes to their formal education too, in addition to providing opportunities to engage in an everyday alternative degrowth life for a few months.

Cargonomia's traineeship programme, which has become like a small-scale degrowth university pilot project, intends to create nurturing self-organised conditions for learners to develop practical and theoretical skills, informed by degrowth, within an open environment that provides structure and flexibility for individual pursuits. It is challenging to maintain a traineeship program catering to learners from diverse backgrounds, fields of interest, with varying levels of experience in physical and 'hands-on' tasks. Reflections and research by current and former trainees on topics such as gender issues are addressed by our team members. Consequently, the traineeship programme involves reciprocal exchange between learners who gain experience to work on individual pursuits after completing the program and supervisors who strive to incorporate challenges and try to respond appropriately to feedback from each group in our ever-developing programme, a work in progress.

The Cargonomia traineeships complement and supplement institutional 'classroom' knowledge, offering informed perspectives of alternative organisations focusing on survival strategies, communication mechanisms and organisational skills. We challenge mainstream pedagogical paradigms by prioritising practice-based skills development along with critical thinking. Regularly, and iteratively, we orient new participants to the operations and priorities of an established cooperative, encouraging open dialogue. Observations and critiques of trainees contribute to the metamorphosis of the host cooperative's structure and activities, as well as the programme, over time. Cargonomia offers novel experiences and imaginaries to rethink not only practice-based training but also, ultimately, university courses and even school-of-life experiences – co-constructing commoning spaces and tools, sharing knowledge and know-how, researching while doing.

Conclusion

The growing visibility of degrowth in academia over the past decade has reversed the initially multifaceted approach of a diverse social movement, practising degrowth theory as an art, with emphases on creativity and functionality. Degrowth first really started when both practitioners and activists using degrowth as a common slogan, and highly critical non-academic intellectual networks, closed to post-development and anti-utilitarianism endorsing degrowth, met. We have argued that re-embedding degrowth academic research and learning within practice and activism should be a priority. Epistemological critiques of academia should always be prioritised. We invite academic degrowth pursuits to embrace pluralistic and participatory relationships with degrowth practice and practitioners.

Impactful, well-informed research should always articulate a reflective praxis – practice and theory embodying strong and robust relational engagements. This is important because we can only envision the degrowth metamorphosis as an ongoing process of feedbacks between generations of ideas and their implementation, and certainly not as a top-down prescription of thinkers to doers when their ideas and theories are ripe. Degrowth is about important transformation, and intellectuals cannot be aware of it if they do not practice, envision and feel the reality of systemic changes, or at least question how to resolve those issues that are in the making. Also practitioners will not change the world if they simply stuck with the day-to-day struggle.

The degrowth field of studies should ambitiously stretch to engage further with prefigurative and other practices in a range of settings, of which, among others, Cargonomia and Can Decreix are examples. Fruitful knowledge, know-how, and practical experiences existing within degrowth and aligned networks should be supported, documented, discussed, analysed and learnings shared. There are great opportunities for more cooperation and solidarity with practitioners within a political movement with utopian goals of conviviality and a good life for all within environmental

boundaries. Examples of good practices include action research, living labs, open alternative educational programmes, practical internships, and re-invigorated degrowth conferences and summer schools. The key challenge is determining how novel practical approaches can be integrated and co-constructed in resilient and inclusive ways. Arguably, independent practitioner-based learning offers more space for audacious and creative experimentation outside of academic institutions. But convivial cooperation between practitioners and academia would be the degrowth ideal.

Isn't it just as legitimate for a practitioner or grassroots activist to speak out on degrowth as for an academic or famous intellectual to do so? The origins of degrowth as a slogan and movement highlight the importance of unison. Indeed, degrowth principles highlight inclusiveness and deliberative democracy, complementary approaches and voices. The organisation of the first international degrowth conference created a fantastic dynamic around degrowth with multiple voices. It gained legitimacy, credibility and visibility for degrowth. But degrowth must offer practical ways forward. We convivially invite non-practitioners into our spaces and to engage with us on more practical futures for degrowth.

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PART IV

Degrowth futures

Perspectives and strategies

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24
TWENTY YEARS OF DEGROWTH
What has been achieved?

Serge Latouche with Vincent Liegey

Degrowth celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2022.[1] The project for a structural alternative to a growth society took shape in France between the publication of an issue of the journal *S!lence* in February 2002, the Ligne d'Horizon symposium at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Défaire le Développement Refaire le Monde (Deconstruct Development, Rebuild the World) conference, 28 February–3 March 2002, and the Casseurs de Pub Conference in Lyon in September 2003, which was explicitly devoted to the theme of degrowth and followed by the launch of the eponymous journal. After a relatively triumphant start, due in part to media curiosity and the heatwave in the summer of 2003, the degrowth movement was eclipsed by the media for a long time. But, degrowth continued underground, in particular by spreading beyond France, first to Latin countries (French-speaking Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, Italy, Spain, Portugal and also Latin America) where the literal translation made sense. Then it was absorbed more ambiguously in the English-speaking world and, finally, has reached about everywhere. With the pandemic and the climate emergency, degrowth has resurfaced recently and even entered the French political debate in the run-up to the 2022 presidential elections.

Claimed for the first time by a French candidate in the ecological primaries in 2021, degrowth is now a proposition that all politicians are forced to confront, if only to reject with horror or contempt a project whose scope is largely unknown. French President Macron himself has referred to it on several occasions and continues to allude to it in order to dissociate himself from it. First, by associating 'growth objectors' with the Amish in September 2020 when promoting the 'French Tech' in front of entrepreneurs at the Élysée (Élysée 2020). As cited in Rof and Faye (2022), he later insisted in Marseille on 16 April 2022:

> I do not believe in degrowth, on the contrary . . . we need to produce and work more . . . [with] Zero-carbon aircraft, hydrogen trains, electric cars produced in France, wind turbines at sea produced in France, mini [nuclear] reactors and so many other solutions.

The example of the Amish, cited as repellent by President Macron in 2020, is interesting to ponder on, not of course to make a slavish imitation in letter and in spirit but to refute objections about the supposed 'unrealism' of the degrowth project since this Protestant community, while rejecting many aspects of modernity, demonstrates a beautiful resilience and an undeniable economic

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success. President Macron's most recent and rather unexpected statement in August 2022 (Willsher 2022) on 'the end of abundance' and the need for moderation (*sobrieté*) immediately sparked a debate among his ministers and others, fuelled by statements from the President and those close to him, on the relationship between *sobrieté* and degrowth. A veritable sophism emerged to clarify the differences between a 'sober' (moderate) society and degrowth. The President (Macron 2022) made a point of clarifying that moderation 'does not mean moving towards a degrowth economy. Not at all. Moderation just means becoming more efficient'. Conversely, two weeks before, Swiss ecologist Dominique Bourg (2022) said on France Inter public radio: 'There is no opposition between *sobrieté* and degrowth: *sobrieté* is the subjective aspect of which degrowth is the objective aspect'. In other words, *sobrieté* is subjective degrowth and degrowth is objective *sobrieté*. As a result, there is renewed interest in degrowth. Degrowth has become a key media issue.

To take stock of these 20 years of degrowth is, of course, to take note of the progress of the idea in society and the initiatives to implement the project in practice, which constitute its assets. But it also means taking account of its liabilities. It warrants an examination of the various strategies implemented to neutralise degrowth, or even to attempt to coopt it, in order to better appreciate where we stand. Since, in terms of concrete measures, things have not moved very far, it is important to identify more precisely the opponents of a political programme of degrowth and the obstacles to achieving an *eco-compatible* society.

The theoretical breakthrough and practical advances

The contrast between the media breakthrough of the idea of degrowth and the theoretical breakthrough of the degrowth project, and practical degrowth advances is both impressive and pathetic. We have seen the reasons for the media response. The emergence of references to degrowth in theoretical thinking is largely the result of the work disseminating this project through newspapers, magazines, television and radio programmes, speeches at conferences, various forums, and books published in both France and abroad. In addition to the French journal *La Décroissance* and its Belgian and Swiss compatriots *Kairos* and *Moins!* there are countless publications, networks and websites that echo some or all of the ideas of degrowth. Even though the scholarly journal *Entropia*, a theoretical and political study of degrowth, had to cease publication after eight years and 16 issues, the debatable *Globish* (Global English) term 'degrowth' has become a subject of academic study, research and theses, at an international level.

It is surprising that the growth objector movement has not become more directly involved in the debate on the commons, which could have raised its profile even further. This debate caused a stir in the alternative world and among certain economists following the award of a Nobel Prize to Elinor Ostrom in 2009. Degrowth, which advocates the decommodification of nature and society, is concerned, albeit indirectly but very strongly, with common goods (water, air, land, the environment, urban spaces, green spaces, landscapes, education, culture and so on). Degrowth goes even further by advocating the revival of *the spirit of giving* through *conviviality*, the development of *relational goods* (knowledge, friendships, *care*, agape), and the promotion of free goods. The main reason for this relative absence is undoubtedly the debate on the *tragedy of the commons* launched by Garrett Hardin's famous article of the same name, which took place within the economic sphere, whereas degrowth proposes nothing less than to 'get out of the economy' (Hardin 1968; Cox 1985; Zimmerman 2020). Since then, degrowth researchers have made up for this delay.

However, it has to be said that beyond the media hype, activist groups and networks of academic researchers, the emergence of a grand narrative of emancipation through a degrowth alternative is having difficulty gaining ground. Not because a society of frugal abundance or prosperity

without growth isn't attractive or well argued, contrary to what its detractors say, but more simply because the appetite for a concrete utopia cannot be born without detoxification from the dominant system, in other words a decolonisation of the imaginary. It's a bit like the two blades of the super Gillette G2 razor in the advertisement where the first blade straightens the hair and the second cuts it. In the case of the choice of an alternative society, this means that the threat or even the experience of a catastrophe fosters an awareness of the need to break with the past, while the narrative of a concrete utopia offers the direction of change, legitimised by a sense of historical filiation. Or, conversely, the grand narrative of regenerating society generates intellectual and sentimental support, while the shock of the foreseeable danger or the predicted disaster triggers a move to action.

Those who – out of self-interest, like climate deniers, or out of opportunism, like media ecologists – denounce degrowth as a punitive ecology, or those who, like the late Bruno Latour, deplore the negative and unattractive side of the concept, are in fact expressing their refusal to assume the symbolic or real cost of a break with the past. Talking about the need to move away from consumerism – and, of course, the economic imaginary – is an irritating subject. On the other hand, Bruno Latour (2017) is right to emphasise the insidious upheaval that has occurred in our shared perception of the world. The ground that we thought was firm under our feet is slipping away, and we are no longer quite sure what kind of world we are living in. This widely shared feeling is certainly a first step in decolonising the imaginary of modernity.

In practical terms, things have certainly changed, although not nearly enough. The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in December 2019 illustrated once again, and in an even more massive and spectacular way, the *fragility of power*, to use the title of Alain Gras's (2003) excellent book – it gave us a good idea of what the collapse of the growth society and the authoritarian, even totalitarian, management of the world after it could be. As former Minister of Environment Yves Cochet (2005, p. 62) put it in 2002 – 'Which government would dare ban flights of less than 500 km, which would reduce their number by 40 per cent, while providing a good quality alternative rail network, or impose a tax of €50 on each ticket to raise money for a fund to combat climate change?' At the time, the answer was that there was none, but things have changed on this point, under the pressure of events.

As the threat grows closer, we are now seeing impressive processions calling for more radical measures to combat climate change. Following in the footsteps of a young Swedish woman, Greta Thunberg, we have seen masses of young (and not so young) people finally mobilising 'for the planet', even if concrete measures to move in the right direction remain timid. There is a striking discrepancy between the relative and unexpected audacity of the proposals made by the 150 citizens randomly chosen at the Citizens Climate Convention in France in 2020 and the vacuity of the laws that followed. The political world's reluctance to act is a cause for concern.

Among the modest positive advances made in recent years, we can cite, for example, the slight drop in waste production in France (down 6.5 per cent between 2007 and 2017, according to figures of the French Agency for Environment and Energy Management (ADEME 2023). But, based on Eurostat (2024), in 2022, more than 2,233 million tonnes of waste were still being produced, which is around 5t per capita. The environmental movement in which degrowth plays a part in France has also been credited with numerous individual and collective initiatives and a number of *victories*, such as the abandonment of the Notre Dame des Landes airport project and a gold mine in French Guiana. However, all this still pales into insignificance compared to the many *defeats* we have suffered.

Finally, for good measure, we can point to the links that degrowth maintains through the sign of the snail with two concrete initiatives for transforming the world: the neo-Zapatista revolution (from which we can trace the visibility of '*buen vivir*' in Andean America) and the slow

food movement. Although the *caracol* of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures is not quite our snail. In fact, it is a freshwater mollusc or a large marine shell, and the reasons for choosing it as a symbol are different for the degrowth movement, for the *slow food* movement and for the neo-Zapatistas. The fact that these three movements, which have obvious similarities (in particular through the emblematic figure of Ivan Illich, who inspires the conviviality of *slow food* and gave his name to the University of the Earth in Saint Cristobal de Las Casas) and complementarities, are coming together is a welcome development and a symbolic sign that our paths are converging.

Nevertheless, all this, which is no mean feat, still falls far short of what is needed. At best, the deterioration has been slowed, and sometimes halted (as in the case of the holes in the ozone layer, it seems), but the situation as a whole continues to deteriorate at a worrying rate to such an extent that one wonders whether *collapse* is not already underway.

Limits and failures in theory and practice

While recent events have not undermined the analysis made when the degrowth movement was launched, there is a strange feeling in France at least that nothing has really moved forward, that the dominant discourse is treading water and sometimes even moving backwards. All we need to do is replace 'sustainable development' with 'green growth', change a few proper names, put Macron in Chirac's place, Trump in Bush's, illustrate the recovery by investing in digital technology rather than motorways, and polish up the bibliographical references with more recent publications, most of which confirm the earlier diagnosis. Many good books have been forgotten or were never published, despite the fact that the analyses they contained remain astonishingly topical and have often been repeated unquoted by new authors with equally ephemeral success. Who remembers, for example, Pierre Thuillier's (1995) excellent book, *La Grande Implosion: Rapport sur l'Effondrement de l'Occident, l999–2002*? For anyone who lived through and still remembers the 1970s, listening to the speeches of most politicians and economic experts is like listening to a broken record.

The relative breakthrough of degrowth in the intellectual world is not always without ambiguity. Since degrowth's notoriety led it to enter the academic world under the transnational name of 'degrowth' and – given that there are even 'degrowth studies' in Anglo-Saxon universities and it is the subject of theses packed with scholarly references – obsessive economists who want to recycle themselves into degrowth have been trying to come up with fine econometric models of the relationship between the regressing capitalist and productivist economy and the expanding convivial *anti-economy*. The radical nature of the original project thus loses much of its potential and militant appeal to the benefit of careerist ambitions. This degrowth is more in line with the alternative economy movement than with an alternative to the economy. Consequently, as contorted by the English-speaking world, *degrowth* can seem too reformist, and is opposed by seemingly more radical projects.

Where degrowth has retained its original radicalism, it has come up against all-out attacks aimed at delegitimising the project. The most effective strategy for delegitimising degrowth is undoubtedly to label it 'punitive ecology' (Guillou 2023). Like its companions, sustainable development and green growth, this media gimmick is enjoying undeniable success because of the weight of routine and the reluctance to change habits. The productivist and consumerist lobbies are using every possible means to prevent the adoption of any ecological measures that tackle situations that are harmful to the environment but profitable, by multiplying biased studies and even outright falsification of the data. Beyond the battle in the field of communication, the battle is being waged in practice with great violence. In addition to state repression of an 'ecoterrorism'

invented to justify it, there is a plethora of rarely condemned criminal actions against environmental activists and whistle-blowers, not just in the countries of the Global South. In France, these practices in the field of agriculture in Brittany were masterfully brought to light during 2023 by the investigations of *Le Monde* journalist Nicolas Legendre (2023).

'The American way of life is not negotiable' as Bush Sr said at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janiero in 1992 (Vidal 2012). If questioning lifestyles and habits involving reduction of certain consumption and, consequently, transformation of the productive apparatus is considered unbearable whatever the benefits in terms of well-being and joy of living that this well-designed change may ultimately bring elsewhere, then yes, degrowth is a punitive ecology. But then, we must admit that there is no real painless ecological transition possible and that any environmental policy is limited to greenwashing. The minimalist ecological policies of most governments – which impose essential measures to limit disasters on the working classes, such as certain taxes – are effectively punitive because they do not call into question the dominant mindset, and they do not provide any other compensation than the prolongation of the survival of the growth society with its inequalities and injustices. In its ecological planning, which is ambitious in words but much less concrete in projects, the government of Elisabeth Borne still comes up against this difficulty. However timid the measures to transform production and consumption may be, there is a price to pay: certain activities decline, businesses disappear, workers are made unemployed, certain products become more expensive, and so on. Win-win has limits. Even though we know that a significant part of ecological destruction is caused by the lifestyle of the rich – the richest 10 per cent are responsible for 34–45 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions according to the lowest estimates of the *Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC* (2023, p. 44) – the government rejected a taxation of super profits voted in the chamber, under the pretext of not 'fracturing the social body' which it did not hesitate to do with the unpopular pension reform. By refusing to tackle gigantic inequalities, the government is destroying both society and the planet a little more. This rejection of the fight against inequalities and the relentless refusal of sharing is certainly one of the clearest markers of the rejection by those in power of non-superficial ecology.

At the same time, concepts that were part of the degrowth mindset are trivialised or limited, thereby contributing to an effort to neutralise the subversive character of the project. This is the case with the bioeconomy, resilience, the circular economy, transition and finally collapse without, of course, counting *sobrieté*. From the impossibility of infinite growth in a finite world resulted in the need to create a bioeconomy for Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, that is to say, to think about the economy within the biosphere. This program was subsequently misused to designate the manipulations of living things in order to try to resolve the ecological crisis through a technicist headlong rush without calling growth into question. This second meaning of 'bioeconomy' has even become a centrepiece of the ideology of green growth, a new oxymoron tending to replace the faded 'sustainable development', and which gives rise to the same mystifying acrobatics on its content (Tordjman 2021).

In recent years, in the same way, the concept of resilience at the heart of the transition movement has been recovered and exploited by 'disaster administrators' – lobbies representing economic interests and governments at their service – to avoid breaking with productivism and giving the impression of resolving the ecological crisis by adapting populations, if necessary even by making them feel guilty (Ribault 2021). Such an instrumentalisation strategy was also carried out with the circular economy, which became the basis of the green deal, the doctrine of the European Commission to confront the ecological crisis (Berlan et al. 2021). Whereas, as an ingenious device to counteract planned obsolescence and waste of resources, it naturally had its place in the implementation of a policy of degrowth.

Riding on the popularity of criticism for assessing wealth in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), a favourite index of growth which completely ignores ecology, President Sarkozy launched a major communication operation in February 2008 (LoC 2008), to crown the great rout of a multi-stakeholder debate known as the Grenelle de l'Environnement, which again promised much and delivered little. In disdain of very competent French experts already working on this theme, Sarkozy called on two global Nobel-winning economists, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, to form an ad hoc commission and submit a report on performance measurement. The commission was made up of a collection of transnational economic luminaries who worked in English and submitted its report in September 2009 (LoC 2009). Obviously, this learned document published with great media hype, brought nothing really new compared to the previous work, of which it made an honest summary. Once the show was over, nothing had substantially changed. Could it be otherwise? How can we believe that the proposal to simply change the indicator would solve all the problems?

Finally, a more perverse form of neutralisation of the subversive potential of degrowth was achieved by its very radicalisation in certain ways. The prospect of collapse, in fact, was widely used by degrowthers to evoke the destiny of the growth society, convince people of the need to break with the software of growth (the first razor blade), and build a sober alternative that is both sustainable and desirable (the second blade). The threats are numerous and of diverse nature – climate disruption, sixth extinction of species, pandemics, social crises and so on – the evocation of catastrophes aimed, above all, to avoid the end of humanity while escaping the misery of the present. The deliberately provocative potential of the degrowth slogan has been partly eclipsed by the vogue for *collapsology*. This is how, in the media, we moved from negating the ecological crisis to the fashion of apocalyptic visions – ignoring system change as advocated by degrowth. This was utopian, unnecessarily alarmist and ridiculous, and was not on the degrowth agenda when it appeared in 2002. It is just as utopian 20 years later, but it is too late now to think about it, so it is still not on the agenda. Previously, the possible catastrophe was an illusion, and it was best to do nothing. Now, there would be nothing left to do except adapt ('resilience') or wait for a technological miracle (geo-engineering or trans-humanism). Governments themselves have not held back from playing on this – Jared Diamond's famous book, *Collapse*, was reported to be President Sarkozy's bedside book in *Nouvel Observateur* (Noyon and Radier 2020).

In practice, the limits of the project's success are even more obvious. Although some countries have reduced their ecological footprint in recent years, following the warnings of successive UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COPs), the figures have unfortunately not changed much overall. Over the past decade the global 'overshoot day' of the year corresponding to the depletion of one earth's renewable resources has continued to get earlier in August except for 2018, when it fell on 25 July; after a slight drop due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems to have temporarily stabilised, humans continuing to use as if we had 1.7 earths (GFN 2024). On the other hand, large-scale, pointless and harmful construction projects are still the order of the day. After the Lötschberg tunnel (34 km) opened in 2007, and the Gotthard tunnel (57 km) opened in 2016, the Brenner tunnel (64 km) is scheduled for 2032, and the Lyon-Turin tunnel (57 km) for 2030. These are among the most titanic European projects of the 21st century. And that's not to mention the countless less-titanic projects, such as the large-scale reservoirs designed to perpetuate production-based agriculture, which are a contradiction in terms when it comes to drought management, and the numerous freeway projects that violate government commitments to halt the concretisation of the soil.

While political and economic leaders multiply declarations of good intentions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they want to maintain or even increase the causes: mass tourism, air transport

and productivist agriculture. In France, despite an €800 mn programme to reduce pesticide use by 50 per cent between 2009 and 2021, pesticide use has *increased* by 15 per cent! We can only repeat Bossuet's famous dictum: 'God laughs at men who deplore the effects of what they cherish as the causes'. Although an American court finally condemned Monsanto to pay a large indemnity to a Californian user who fell victim to Roundup, recent polls tell us that opposition to GMOs is decreasing in public opinion, and a French court condemned the Confédération Paysanne to pay a large indemnity to Monsanto. So far, Europe has managed to protect us from first-generation GMOs, but it looks as though the same will not be true for the new more subtle GMOs. Lobbying by Bayer, which in the meantime has absorbed Monsanto, is repeating the same argument about the supposedly beneficial ecological effects of the new GMOs, despite the fact that previous promises concerning the old ones have proved false. Nevertheless, the European Commission is preparing to authorise the new genetic chimeras in 2023, and President Macron seems to be giving them his blessing in his France 2030 plan. On these GMO developments, see Foucart (2021).

As for inequality, recent reports by the nongovernmental organisation Oxfam are even more damning, as we have seen that the rich pollute infinitely more than the poor. In 2010 wealth equivalent to the income of half of humanity was held by 368 people; in 2011 by 166, in 2012 by 159, in 2013 by 92 in 2014 by 80, in 2016 by 62, in 2017 by 8, and finally just 5 people in 2018 (Germani 2021, p. 249). The second *World Inequality Lab* report, published in December 2021, and taking wealth inequality into account is even more damning. While the top 10 per cent capture 35 per cent of income, they own between 60 per cent and 80 per cent of wealth, according to Lechevallier (2021). Over the past 25 years, the share of the world's wealth owned by billionaires has tripled, continues Lechevallier (2021) – the richest 1 per cent got their hands on 38 per cent of the increase in wealth, while the poorest 50 per cent captured just 2 per cent. The French government's stubborn refusal to tax super-profits, the existence of which the Minister of the Economy even goes so far as to deny, is emblematic of the eco-tartuffery of the small gestures to save the planet policy put forward with energy sobriety.

The threats are far from over. The effects of climate change are increasingly being felt, exacerbating the conflicts, contradictions and frustrations of so-called developing societies; the flow of migrants seeking to reach rich countries at the cost of their lives is growing, while borders are increasingly being closed, multiplying human tragedies. The instrumentalisation of this 'migratory threat' by populist demagogues fosters the rise of far-right political parties, which play on fears of a mythical 'Great Replacement', exaggerated fears of Islamic terrorism and the loss of national identity.

In the end, while the balance sheet is not dishonourable, degrowth remains both a challenge and a gamble. A challenge to the beliefs underpinning modernity, because this slogan constitutes an unbearable provocation, even a blasphemy, for the worshippers of progress and development, which enables the lobbies defending the continuation of disaster to neutralise dissent. A gamble, almost in the Pascalian sense, because, however necessary it may be, nothing is less certain than the realisation of the project of an autonomous society of convivial frugality. But, at the same time, we have nothing to lose by daring to take the risk and everything to gain. More than ever, the challenge is worth taking up, and the gamble worth trying.

Note

1 An original version of this chapter was published in the Belgian degrowth journal *Kairos in June–August 2022, no. 55. This version was revised and updated by Serge Latouche, and translated with further attention to references by Vincent Liegey, for this handbook.*

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25

ROLES OF UTOPIAN THOUGHT IN A DEGROWTH TRANSFORMATION

Alexandra Köves

It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism is the favourite slogan of capitalist realists (Fisher 2009), and it offers us no solace in times when six out of nine planetary boundaries are crossed (Richardson et al. 2023), and inequality rises at incredible rates (Hickel 2018). It suggests to us that 'there is no alternative' and only those playing well the current rules of the game are fit enough to survive. Degrowth comes up against this highly cynical, utilitarian but currently dominant logic. No wonder, 'decolonise the imaginary', the slogan attributed to Serge Latouche (2009, Chapter 24, this volume) has become the motto of degrowth.

Any degrowth scholar or activist must be painfully familiar with the feeling when the whole concept of degrowth – with all the degrowth practice, literature, research and social innovation of the last decades – is dismissed with one word, 'utopia'. As if it was a mere intellectual amusement to think of ways to rid our societies from its massive addiction to growth in order to put a stop to ecological degradation and, incidentally, to save ourselves as well as other species from extinction. To many, the dystopian thoughts of the apocalyptic Mad Max worlds where humans turn against each other after social and ecological collapse seems more credible than any quest to imagine a world where people live convivially and in solidarity with each other and other non-human beings. In this chapter, I do not just dismiss the notion that being utopian would be a futile exercise but argue that utopian thought can be the very foundation of our collective understanding and action in a world often described as complex and ambiguous.

Thomas More ([1516] 2012) toyed with the Greek words 'outopia' and 'eutopia' when describing the society of his own imaginary as Utopia. While the first one refers to no-place, the second refers to a good-place (Vieira 2010; Fernando et al. 2018). This ambiguity still impacts the way people dismiss or embrace utopian concepts such as degrowth. Whether in our everyday speech we believe utopia is 'an impractical scheme for social development' (*Merriam-Webster* undated) or 'a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy' or in British *Cambridge Dictionary* (undated), in this chapter we move beyond the conundrum surrounding the definition of utopia (Vieira 2010) and work with the understanding that utopia is a normative vision of society: not what we think the world could be but what we imagine it should be in an ideal scenario. Utopias can serve three distinct functions: first, they can motivate people to engage in activities that drive societies closer to what they deem ideal; second, they serve as a benchmark for the ideal and enable people to assess current realities accordingly, giving them a critical stance

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towards existing structures; and, third, they can provide a safe mental space to retreat to from reality and compensate for the bleak social reality people face, leading to some forms of escapism (Levitas 1990). Or they might just simply build up our social realities. Before we have a look at that last possibility, let us discuss the role of utopias on the individual level.

Humans as essentially utopian beings

In many debates that I have had, differences of opinions often boiled down to one fundamental difference – how we perceived human beings. Those who believed humans were inherently bad often argued that we cannot in any way achieve a society better than the current one as capitalism built itself on exploiting the worst in us and this is why it will flourish forever. And even if it will not flourish forever, what we create after this will soon be just as bad as none of our social systems have been better and none will ever be better. In other words, we get what we deserve. On the other end of the spectrum, I stood with my unexplained faith in humans, arguing that our inner core is essentially benevolent and our debates around philosophy, morality, spirituality and psychology are all signs of this essence. In my undeniably anthropocentric worldview, I shared the Aristotelian sentiment that with each decision we make, we strive to be more virtuous whatever virtue might mean to each one of us. Hence, I found much solace in the words of the Italian philosopher, Cosimo Quarta (1996, p. 160):

> What makes human life worthy of being lived is above all this task of self-construction of a person, a task which demands a lifetime's commitment and effort, precisely because humanity insofar as its nature is finite and is subject to collapse and ruin but is also able each time to raise itself up again and set out once more – even with enthusiasm – on its long and arduous journey of self-realisation. Now, this impulse to reach out towards what ought to be, this tendency of self-transcendence, this deep aspiration to become what is Not Yet, makes of humanity a being that is essentially projective, that is utopian. In other words, the utopian is the characteristic that has indelibly marked humanity.

While this may sound like a highly individualistic train of thought, I believe exactly this aspiration 'to become what is Not Yet' drives so many people around the globe to collectively fight for a better world. And I presume that most degrowthers share my belief that humans are not fundamentally malevolent. Why else would we strive to stop ourselves heading towards extinction?

Some time ago I participated in a Degrowth Political School where activists expressed their upmost respect towards the mass movement Les Soulèvements de la Terre (the Earth Uprising collective). This collective was established by former members of the *zone à défendre* (ZAD – a militant occupation, deferred development zone) who had kept up their struggle at Notre-Dame-Des-Landes (France) to obstruct an international airport from being built on 4,000 acres of wetland. Finally, after 40 years of struggle, the airport project was finally abandoned in 2018, labelled by the French government as 'a territory lost to the republic'. The activists I met told us how much inspiration they gained from this movement. But where did the activists in the ZAD get their inspiration from to keep going against the odds for decades? The book *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* by Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan (2021) pays tribute to the incredible transformative imaginaries of the people involved in this movement – rooted in a wide array of political, theoretical, spiritual and artistic traditions.

Psychology suggests that our actions are often influenced by images of our possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), the person we can imagine becoming or would want to completely

avoid becoming. We pursue completely different paths if our mental image of ourselves tells us that we can become filthy rich through being a Wall Street yuppie or we find it appealing to live in a commune and devote our time to gardening and spiritual growth. One motivates us to have a finance degree and learn all tricks of the trade at stock markets, wear designer clothes and finally move to New York, while the other motivates us to find a community where we belong and learn about gardening as well as spiritual traditions. Possible selves also stop us doing things. If we do not want to resemble to our parents, we do all we can to avoid similar traits or actions. We may never end up in New York. Instead of the commune we may end up living alone in a high rise building that does not even have a balcony where we can garden. Despite doing everything we can to act like our parents, we end up pretty similar to them. However, it is our actions along the way that would have been very different, had we not had images of these possible alternative selves.

Human beings are capable of seeing what is not yet there. We plant seeds into the ground in the Autumn and even if we cannot see anything now, still know that next Spring there will be green plants and also bread on the table. Modern psychology deals more and more with the abilities of such foresight and prospecting, and with how they play a crucial role in the way we evaluate the effects and consequences of the decisions that we make in the present. Foresight (Seligman et al. 2013) is the estimation of what will happen in the future or what should happen in the future, and research shows that it is a significant part of our everyday thinking. Foresight is the ability to create and evaluate different future scenarios, which includes being able to consider our own future emotions as well as our environments' potential alternatives. These are the abilities that allow us to save for our retirement years, put away savings for the winter, or develop long-term sustainability strategies (Bulley and Suddendorf 2016). Imagining what should be in our future ideally, we opt for action instead of just going with the flow, which normally simply upholds the status quo. Experimental research (Burden et al. 2018) also shows that focusing on the psychological process, engaging with utopian thinking – rather than the content of utopias – indeed leads to people being more motivated to both criticise current societies and participate in activities that might lead to changes.

Where utopian beings meet: social imaginaries

If we accept Quarta's argument that we are essentially utopistic, there must be ways for our individual utopias to meet and make up the social realm by interacting with each other. Castoriadis (1997) suggests that everything that happens in a society is the result of an interplay between different social imaginaries. Even if the dominant paradigms make us believe that institutions are mere entities of function, in reality they are built on imaginaries and their operations result in reinforcing and limiting prevailing imaginaries that in return manifest themselves in institutions. 'Every thought, whatever it may be and whatever may be its 'object', is but a mode and a form of social-historical doing', writes Castoriadis (1997, p. 3).

Each of us having a mental image of what might be, should be or could be before we do something happens on a collective level as well. Even if our actions are surrounded by the unknown and the unpredictable, not knowing how things would turn out hardly ever stops us choosing a profession, wanting to have a child or travelling to faraway lands. Why should it when it comes to collective decisions? And why should it be different when it comes to expressing our desires as to what direction we wish for society to evolve? Just because we may never live the day when it becomes our common reality, working towards it is the only way 'I am in a position to partially realise this desire' (Castoriadis1997, p. 93).

A social imaginary may propose a 'maximum programme' (Castoriadis 1997, p. 86) to respond to a problem of the social totality. Any social change (such as changing the ownership of production) would necessarily lead to changes in the other spheres (such as in education, organisational forms and so on). However, we cannot expect everything to happen in parallel at the same time, affecting all individuals in the same way. These are dynamic processes where imaginaries shape and reshape institutions, and institutions shape and reshape individual and collective imaginaries. It also means that, if in one sphere, something seems possible, another sphere can render it impossible and vice versa, something that seems improbable today may seem perfectly likely or natural tomorrow. This implies that, by nature, no utopias can ever be realised in their wholeness. But that is not the point of utopias. Just by being conscious of our social imaginaries and their interplay with institutions enables us to find constantly evolving answers to our collective problems. As Castoriadis (1997, p. 90) says:

> Revolutionary praxis is, therefore, not required to produce the complete and detailed model of the society it intends to establish; nor does it have to "demonstrate" and provide an absolute guarantee that this society could solve all the problems that might ever arise. It is enough that it shows that there is nothing inconsistent in what it proposes and that, as far as can be seen, its realization would greatly increase society's capacity to face up to its own problems.

Only when we accept that society consists of autonomous individuals who can freely express, reflect on and share their social imaginaries – not of infantilised adults who receive their fair share of predigested visions of what social life can and must be – can we start building a more sustainable and just society.

Such imaginaries are often supported by literature or art that enables us to have a peep into what is not yet there and what it could look like. The novel by Ursula le Guin *The Dispossessed* (1974) is about a utopian society built consciously on Annares – the moon of capitalist Urras – that manages to find well-being on a barren planet. At the same time, the lavish life based on possession on lush Urras makes the people devoid of a truly satisfying life. Through the thoughts of its main character, the Annaresti physicist Shevek, who travels between both worlds, the novel manages to make us realise how what we feel or are made to feel about our current social system is by no means the only way to feel. There are a myriad of other sources of a good life that are independent of material wealth. Such thought experiments offered to us as science fiction enable us to move away from unquestioned cornerstones of our current system and make us weigh the benefits and hardships of potential alternative worlds. Le Guin does not depict a perfect utopian society but forces us to pick the guiding values we would pursue without idealising them. Giorgos Kallis and Hug March (2014) wonderfully link this book's relevance to degrowth through grasping the socially constructed nature of scarcity, understanding how to build a future based on comprehending the past, and in addressing the roles that conflict plays in such transitions.

In my own research I have also experienced how art can play a significant part in making normative visions vivid. 'Backcasting' is a methodology that uses normative scenarios in the future as a starting point and works its way back from that future, looking at interventions that increase the chances of systems moving towards a desired direction (Robinson et al. 2011). Backcasting on the future of responsible and sustainable business was turned into a theatrical action game played on numerous occasions successfully, bringing the ideas of a beyond-profit business world closer to people (Köves et al. 2019). In another example, a backcasting project was run at a marketing media agency, where participants envisioned how their industry could be turned upside down to contribute to a better world rather than upholding the current status quo (Köves and Király 2021).

A science fiction writer was asked to turn their vision into a novel to make it easier for people to grasp the possibility of such a world (Szélesi 2018). Even if the utopia described in that novel is more likely to uphold current narratives – and with its techno-optimistic concepts can hardly be characterised as deeply subversive, as Kallis and March (2015) use the term – it can influence the dominant value choices of industry. Deborah Lambert (2020) compares different initiatives in Brussels that aim to induce change in the way we produce our food. She shows how, even with the same benevolent aim to make food production more sustainable, some social imaginaries still serve the status quo, while others work towards radical systemic change with imaginaries that fall into the realm of subversive utopias.

During my debates on degrowth, people often claim that constructing any utopia is a useless pastime as we cannot overcome certain facts and realities. The most common arguments are that humans are selfish; competition is the only way to develop; and innovation is the product of greed. Such arguments not only infer some kind of predetermined human nature but also take past history as something free of narratives and imaginaries. *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) shows us how our current understanding of human history has been shaped by dominant narratives and social imaginaries, most of which have been with us only since the enlightenment and such historical 'facts' are merely pick-and-mix representations of what might have been. All this to support the case that massive inequalities, wars and autocratic leadership are historically proven attributes of human social existence. In reality we have no knowledge of how humans had lived for hundreds of thousands of years in prehistoric times and many indigenous traditions have vastly different understandings of how humans are capable of organising themselves. While dominant historical narratives suggest that egalitarian social organisations are only possible in small 'uncivilised' tribes, archaeological findings suggest that many communities, and the earliest cities, were free of hierarchies and inequalities (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Hence, social imaginaries not only shape our understanding of the future but also our understanding of the past.

Alternative visions of potential societal modus operandi come from various movements all over the world with a similar aim to transcend the dominant system in order to live in harmony with nature and each other (David Barkin, Chapter 12, this volume). Their approaches provide not only distinct narratives but also concrete practical initiatives; radical praxis serves as a constant inspiration for the degrowth pluriverse (Demaria et al. 2023). The many distinctive understandings of how personal, social and economic life could be different do not have to follow dominant Western way of seeing the world around us. As an example, the *eco-swaraj* of India showcase how individuals and communities can practice collective decision-making in transformative ways and how these collectives can redefine well-being in many different segments of life. Radical Ecological Democracy is a recent conceptual framework based on notions of *eco-swaraj* as five interlocking spheres (Kothari 2024): ecological wisdom and resilience; social well-being and justice; direct or radical political democracy; economic democracy; and, finally, cultural and knowledge plurality.

Utopias for navigating complexity

Whether we assess that deliberating, conceptualising and refining a meaningful, ideal social state that may never come into existence is a necessity, or a senseless exercise, may also represent a clash of worldviews.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to argue whether or not capitalism and enlightenment came hand in hand – for 'con' arguments, see Wood (1997); for 'pro' arguments Dupre (2008) – they almost certainly twinned each other and emerged in parallel. Enlightenment brought with it the proposition that everything in our universe is made up of parts that are mechanistically

linked together and, through understanding the parts and the laws behind the cause-and-effect processes that bind them together, we have no problem describing our world. We started treating the cosmos, nature, the human body and our societies as machines that we can – like engineers – dismantle, examine their parts, rationally and objectively establish the laws behind their behaviours. And, once we have all that knowledge, control and influence, they will operate the way we want. This also meant that, if the individual parts function well and interact with each other through the laws that describe their behaviour, the machine works appropriately.

These thoughts were mirrored by economic rationale as well. If the parts – individuals pursuing their own utility-maximisation strategies – work well enough, linked to each other through the simplified laws of the market like supply and demand – then the economic machinery will do its task and will benefit us all. The baker will want to earn as much money as possible and, hence, it logically follows that s/he will not bake bad bread as people will not buy it but rather turn to the baker who does bake good bread. Therefore, as long as there are no barriers for new bakers to enter the market and people are free to move from one baker to the next, they will eat good (and cheap) bread. Hence, everyone is happy, and the system works adequately.

As degrowth is based on a critique and, finally, a complete dismissal of this notion, I do not need to detail why this logic leads to a downright disregard for nature. For the sake of our current argument, it is enough to establish that the natural environment has been treated as separate from, and subservient to, the economy. Transcending our current economic operations also means that we need to transcend the worldview behind it. Just as many aspects of physics and biology are now understood through a systems rather than mechanistic worldview (Capra and Luisi 2014), it is desirable that economists similarly resolve to adopt a systems perspective.

While many degrowthers base their understanding of the economy as embedded – based on the thoughts of Polanyi (2001 [1944]) – this embeddedness is not merely a linear appreciation of large, larger, largest. This is not the embeddedness of the Matryoshka type but rather an entanglement of the economic, social and ecological. It is obvious that without a healthy natural environment, human societies cease to exist, while without human societies ecological systems would certainly change but not perish. Like the 'hierarchy of systems' (Rousseau 2017), where the whole is much more than the sum of its parts taken altogether, properties can arise that otherwise would not exist. Accepting the immense complexity stemming from the entanglement of these systems suggests that we must acknowledge that any event in one domain will impact another one in sometimes unpredictable ways.

In a systems view, understanding how networks work is key. A complex system works properly if not only the individual nodes function well but also the relationships between them are appropriate. In a network, there is no separation; no divisions as all parts are connected to each other directly or indirectly. What happens to one node affects the others around it and eventually the whole and, through affecting the whole, influences revert back to the original node. The more complex the system, the more important it is for its resilience that subsystems have diverse tasks and diverse properties since, if there is a problem in any part of the network, then other parts can help out, and the whole does not collapse.

In a network, the focus is, thus, on relationships. Nodes are not independent from each other, as they constantly interact. If we think in terms of a network of people, the individuals in the network do not have complete freedom, since they depend on how the people around them and in the entire system behave. However, they have autonomy, they can self-organise and determine their own behaviour, but they do not have the freedom to become independent from the system. Neither their own behaviour nor the behaviour of the system as a whole is deterministic. It is not possible to say in advance what kind of interactions and, thus, what dynamic changes will emerge within the

system, given the behaviours and decisions at any given moment. We need to accept that we only have an approximate knowledge of all this. In complex systems, so many impulses coming from actors interact in parallel and strengthen or cancel each other out, that the end result is unpredictable and highly uncertain.

Degrowthers know this all too well. Incredibly complex systems connect human and non-human beings, our economic systems, our ecological systems, our technologies, our communities – these affect and react with each other in ways that we still only have an approximate knowledge of. Our global economic system, already operating as a complex network on its own, affects and is being affected by our natural environment. Climate change threatens to reach a point where dynamic, non-linear processes push our climate systems into a new equilibrium point that could destroy our social networks, which are in close symbiosis with natural ones (Rockström et al. 2009). In the meantime, we lose the mental handholds on which we were able to build. After all, you can fix a machine. You can intervene in a linear cause-and-effect process by understanding exactly what happens after your intervention. But now we no longer feel this certainty.

We are facing terribly fast and unpredictable changes filled with uncertainties and see multiples of possibilities while having access to only one of the myriads of 'truths', namely the one surrounding our node. This kind of ambiguity is key when we link systems thinking to utopian thought. We put a machine on the table and dismantle it. We see how it all works, find out the problem, repair the broken parts, and reassemble it. We monitor, control, and manage the process from the outside. If, on the other hand, we are one of the nodes within a complicated system, we cannot see the whole from the outside. We see the nodes around us. We can feel the impulses of the system around us. We can learn how we function quite well in it. But by default, we can only see it from a limited perspective. Another node will see it from another perspective, and these realities will compete leading to ambiguity. Like the six blind men of Indostan in the widely cited poem by John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887), each with a firm opinion and, even if based on partial information, somewhat correct yet 'all were in the wrong!'

The significance of utopian thought comes into the picture in a degrowth transformation once we understand the limits of comprehending the impacts of our actions. If we accept – as degrowth does – that we are all part of complex systems, we either give up on the idea of systemic change initiated from within or seek a potentially key mediating variable. We can be reflective of the systems' existing properties with our limited knowledge and act within our limited scope, but we need many similar impulses from different parts of the system to increase the chance of a new system property emerging. If many nodes start sending similar impulses through their autonomous actions, beyond cause-and-effect processes, they increase the chance of required change. This is what we often refer to as critical mass (Ball 2004). However, all this requires a common narrative. The common narrative is the mediating variable. This foresight capacity enables us to act in unison globally following common narratives.

Going back to our complex systems, for each node to send similar impulses, there needs to be a shared vision of what new traits each would want to see in the system or what old properties they would want to cancel out. This vision can determine the direction not only of individual action (as a node) but also of collective action (of a number of nodes). Although the impulses cannot guarantee the reaction of the complex system as a whole (as it depends on the interactions with other nodes and impulses), it can increase the probability of changing properties.

The notion of purposive finality of Von Bertalanffy (1955), one of the greatest minds of systems theory, should be important to degrowth thinkers. Purposive finality means that, while an actor in a complex system may have a vision of where the nonlinear and dynamic system should evolve towards, solutions and pathways need to be diverse, and unexpected consequences anticipated

(Van Assche et al. 2019). According to Von Bertalanffy (1955), what we deem as a potential route of evolution of the socio-economic sphere is strongly limited by our understanding of what may, or may not, be possible in the same system both internally and externally. Hence, in this manner, utopian thought can be considered a purposive finality – opening up our ways of understanding our possibilities, where reaching the outcome is by no means ensured, but possibilities themselves enable a harmonising of actions of the different nodes in the system, creating a von Bertalanffy (1955) 'unity in action'.

Hedrén and Linnér (2009) argue that in order to be able to move towards sustainability, our understanding of the world must transcend three presumptions that are strongly held beliefs in modernity. First, we must transcend national boundaries that they call 'fixed territoriality'. Second, we need to rid ourselves of the ideals of 'fixed truths' or scientification that imply that, in science, we must be able to find one right answer to the one objective reality. And third, we should not expect 'fixed final goals for politics' as we have to accept that no roadmaps or blueprints exist for structural changes. And, to overcome all this, we need widely debated normative visions and contested utopias.

Yesterday's utopia is today's reality

When the degrowth motto originating from Serge Latouche calls us to decolonise our imaginaries, we need to build on Castoriadis' plea to create and act on new narratives in order to find adequate answers to today's social ills and not buy into the social imaginary built on the economism of growth and consumption (Asara et al. 2015).

Whatever we take for granted today as a leading narrative of our social realm once constituted a utopia and some of still does even if not deemed utopian. The promise that we can achieve social justice and environmental protection while maintaining economic growth is utopian (Harlow et al. 2013). Some thoughts – classified in the past as utopias – have since become the cornerstones of the capitalist narrative to tackle climate change with absolutely no attached labels of being utopian (Hjerpe and Linnér 2009). The consumer society's promise to supply a never-ending abundance of material wealth thus leading us all to happiness bases itself on value choices that we no longer question. But it is a utopia. Hence, it is not having utopias that we should contest but rather we should question and deliberate on the values behind them, and take utopia for what it is – a way to criticise current forms of social organising and debate the values we wish to build into our societies through constructing visions (Friedmann 2000).

Wright (2012) suggests that we should create tangible utopian models that offer alternatives to our current societal structures and practices. These, what he calls, 'real utopias' are essentially social experiments designed to address the shortcomings of our existing reality while considering their limitations and potential unintended outcomes. Many scholars well-known to degrowthers also use normative scenarios, real utopias, to outline the world that transcends our current economic paradigms. Robert Costanza, in *Addicted to Growth* (2023), argues that the only societal therapy that can lead us out of our sick addiction to economic growth is the capability to envision alternatives. *Future for All: A Vision for 2048* by degrowth scholars Kuhnhenn et al. (2024) presents concrete ways of living in a degrowth future based on the visioning processes of 200 people. Paul Raskin et al. (2002) also used a wide range of scenarios – or 'dreams', as he sometimes calls them – to propagate the 'great transition' to a more sustainable modus operandi.

In our experience – having used backcasting in many different research projects covering diverse topics – normative envisioning itself invokes a feeling of responsibility for future generations. When imagining the coexistence of humans and artificial intelligence (AI), many AI

experts – without prior considerations for such perspectives – chose to envisage a decentralised, democratised technology that serves both nature and humans in a sustainable and just future (Köves et al. 2024). During the aforementioned backcasting project at the marketing media agency, even without framing the topic around sustainability and social justice, participants came up with a vision revolving around these themes, and had to face their own cognitive dissonances between what they would want to see in the world and what they contribute towards in their everyday jobs (Köves and Király 2021).

We often perceive the future to be a direct continuation of the past and the present, and we build our future thinking based on the extrapolation of the present into the future. However, our complex world also means that unexpected occurrences can derail the trends and tendencies of the present, and black swan events (Taleb 2001) radically change pathways in a unforeseen ways. Their foreseeability is impossible either because they are brought about by previously unknown properties in the system or because their occurrence results from a series of low-probability events whose effects on each other seemed unpredictable in light of our previous knowledge. Therefore, due to these uncertainties and dynamic influences, we should not see the future as a linear continuation of the past.

Understanding the interrelatedness of complex socio-economic and ecological systems influences the behaviour of both those who are concerned about humanity being affected negatively by environmental degradation, and those who are concerned about nature being negatively affected by humanity and treat our moral obligation to protect it in its own right and not just as an ecosystems service provider to humans. This kind of systems thinking has been proven to induce not just much more concern for distinct viewpoints, tolerance for various perspectives and much more mental flexibility to adapt to new solutions, but also the tendency to consider limits to growth over sheer meritocratic performance (Frank 2006). Evidence also suggests that those with stronger systems thinking as a cognitive paradigm engage more in pro-environmental behaviour (Davis and Stroink 2016).

However, seeing the world as a complex, interrelated system also means that we accept that history does not unfold itself as a predictable roadmap. We cannot have a degrowth recipe for all or the perfect degrowth blueprint for policymakers. What we can and must have is the inspiration to send just the right individual and collective impulses to enhance our chances of seeing new characteristics in our systems. And, for this, we need utopia. As Quarta (1996, p. 164) writes, 'this is why we should regard the dissolution of the utopian tension as the sound of an alarm bell for humanity'. Luckily, degrowthers know this all too well.

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26

GROWTH, DEGROWTH AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Olivier De Schutter

Introduction

Calls for 'degrowth' or for 'post-growth' approaches to development have had an increased audience since the 1970s, when initial fears were expressed about the impacts of human activities on the environment – as the metabolism of the economy leads to more resource extraction, to biodiversity loss, and to various forms of waste and pollution. Yet, since the start, degrowth or post-growth advocates have faced the counter-argument – increasing the gross domestic product (GDP), they are told, however worrisome the ecological footprint, is still necessary to combat poverty.

This chapter questions the conventional view. It argues that the search for growth has been a diversion from what really matters – to improve well-being and the reduce poverty and inequalities. The argument proceeds in three steps. The following section recalls the dominant narrative about the correlation between growth and poverty reduction. Next, I seek to explain the notion of 'counterproductivity' of growth – under certain circumstances, when pursued through certain tools, the search for GDP increase can actually worsen poverty and social exclusion, creating the very problem growth was meant to address. Finally, I outline the broad contours of a human rights economy, and I seek to explain how such an economy can be more effective in the eradicating poverty. I briefly conclude.

The dominant narrative

The argument against 'degrowth' proposals as a response to the environmental crises includes two inter-related claims. First, GDP increases would result in creating employment opportunities, thus not only ensuring access to jobs for the unemployed (or those in unvoluntary underemployment) but also strengthening the bargaining position of workers who are employed and their unions. Second, GDP growth would allow an increase in the public revenue available for the financing of public services and social protection, thus leading to the virtuous cycle characteristic of the post-World War II Fordist arrangement – while total output increases, investors (shareholders in successful corporations) benefit through increased returns on their investment, the state benefits through increased revenue from taxation, and workers benefit through increased wages commensurate with

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productivity gains. The two claims are inter-related – to the extent that GDP increases support employment creation in combination with productivity gains, it can stimulate spending and, thus, the perpetuation of growth, overcoming occasional slowdowns resulting from business cycles.

This 'win-win-win' arrangement has its intellectual source in Keynesianism. Throughout most of the 20th century, it embodied the conventional wisdom of the times, and did so across the whole political spectrum. To maintain the cycle's functioning, the Left favoured minimum wage legislation and strong social protection, whereas the Right insisted on maintaining public deficits under control and creating a business-friendly investment climate. They disagreed on how to create growth, and they also disagreed on how its benefits should be shared between shareholders, the state and workers. But on the desirability of growth itself, a robust consensus always prevailed. Both sides of the aisle saw it as a necessary ingredient of social progress. Is this correct?

Economic growth and employment

The first component of the dominant narrative is that by increasing the total output of the economy, jobs will be created, thus leading to full employment. Within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which embody the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 8 at least implicitly endorses that postulate – it explains its insistence on 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all', noting that '[s]ustainable economic growth will require societies to create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs that stimulate the economy while not harming the environment' (SDG 2024). Thus, growth should be encouraged to support employment creation which, in turn, remains an essential tool against poverty.

This latter postulate seems difficult to counter. A World Bank study showed that, while social protection did play a greater role in reducing extreme poverty, labour income was the largest single contributor to the reduction of 'moderate' poverty in a set of 16 low- and middle-income countries in which substantial poverty reduction occurred in the period 2000–2010; in 10 of these countries, labour income explained more than half of the change in moderate poverty, and in 14 of them, it explained more than 40 per cent of the change in poverty figures (Azevedo et al. 2013). No country can achieve substantial poverty reduction without creating jobs. Shouldn't we aim at increasing the total economic output, therefore, in order to achieve this?

The argument linking growth to employment was made popular in a 1962 publication by Arthur M. Okun, at the time a member of the United States (US) President's Council of Economic Advisors and professor at Yale University. Okun argued that the economy should strive to achieve its 'potential gross national product', by using the right fiscal and monetary tools, to ensure that the total aggregate output would employ at least 96 per cent of the civilian workforce (the 4 per cent unemployment rate was considered purely 'frictional'); the relationship between increasing total output and creating employment was established using an empirical analysis of quarterly US data for the period 1947–1960, which led him to conclude that for every percentage point of output growth above normal or potential growth, the unemployment rate of the US would fall by about 0.3 percentage points (Okun 1962).

Over the past 40 years, however, this postulate has been amply disproven. Whereas, since 2012, the correlation between GDP increase and unemployment reduction amounted to a meagre 0.34 for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Laurent 2021), the correlation between GDP growth and the employment rate has in fact been highly uneven across countries – for the period 1970–2002, for instance, a 1 per cent GDP increase led to a 0.8 per cent fall in unemployment in Spain, but to a meagre 0.05 per cent fall in Luxembourg (Perman

and Tavéra 2005) – and it has generally been much weaker in developing countries, particularly low-income countries, than in the more advanced economies (Lee et al. 2020). Such differences between countries are attributable in particular to the organisation of labour markets – which may or may not favour linking decisions about hiring or laying off workers to business cycles (Porras-Arena and Martín-Román 2023) – to the role of small- and medium-sized enterprises, informal sector and technological developments. In his initial study, Okun (1962) chose to take the existing state of technology as a given (a 'data', as he called it), rather than as a variable. However, if total output is increased by increasing the hourly productivity of workers thanks to the introduction of labour-saving technologies, it is far from clear whether employment creation will result – in fact, the net results may even be negative.

Economic growth and financing of public services

The second component of the dominant narrative is that economic growth is necessary to finance public services and social protection: without growth, the state would be unable to deliver to the population the services it owes to them. This argument is premised on the idea that public revenue can only be raised on the basis of economic activity, through indirect taxes (consumption taxes), direct (personal or corporate) income taxes, royalties paid by companies exploiting natural resources, or tariffs levied on imports or exports, in particular.

It is true that these sources of state revenue have been, historically, the most significant; and it is also true that, where the state relies on such sources of funding, it depends on the maintenance or the increase of total output in order to be able to continue to fund the services it provides. Yet, it is incorrect to conclude that the increase of economic activity is the only way for the state to be able to continue to provide services to its population. In particular, much more focus could go to taxing wealth, rather than income.

Indeed, a shift from financing state revenue by taxing income to taxing wealth (including both immovable and financial assets) would not only reduce the dependency on economic growth; it also would significantly help to achieve social justice. In OECD countries, the inheritances and gifts reported by the wealthiest households (top 20%) are close to 50 times higher than those reported by the poorest households (bottom 20%); households in the top 1 per cent receive as much as 18 per cent of the total amount transferred in Germany and the US, while the share going to the bottom 25 per cent is very low (Nolan et al. 2020, p. 51). Across OECD countries, the value of inheritances and gifts received by households in the top net wealth quintile amounts, on average, to 72 per cent of the mean net wealth across all households; in comparison, this value represents less than 1.5 per cent of the mean net wealth of the total population for those in bottom net wealth quintile (OECD 2018, p. 206). Inherited wealth inequalities have been growing in historical perspective; moreover, the share of inherited wealth has increased in Europe and the US from 30–40 per cent in the 1950–1980 period to 50–60 per cent since 2010 (Alvaredo et al. 2017).

Inheritance thus plays an important role in perpetuating and even reinforcing inequalities. And this goes beyond financial security alone – the stability of the financial situation of parents is associated with higher levels of parental education, better schools and more engaged parenting, among other factors all likely to affect child development (Heckman and Mosso 2014, p. 31). Moreover, the wealth an individual can mobilise significantly enhances his or her ability to seize opportunities, by investing in education (allowing children from wealthy families to focus on the academic challenges of higher education instead of the financial ones) but also by allowing children to be coopted in lucrative family businesses or to invest in new (including risky) enterprises (Braga et al. 2017).

Wealth inequality is, therefore, a major factor perpetuating poverty (Palomino et al. 2018). One cross-country comparison has shown that parental wealth outperforms income in explaining differences in intergenerational mobility, with strong effects on children's life chances (Smeeding et al. 2011, p. 123). Countries with greater inequality therefore tend to be countries where economic advantage and disadvantage is passed on to children (OECD 2015, p. 27), a relationship between income inequality and intergenerational income mobility often referred to as the Great Gatsby Curve. Among OECD countries, the ties between parental economic status and the adult earnings of their children are the weakest in Denmark, Finland, or Norway, and strongest in Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), or the US – where children raised at the top and bottom deciles are far more likely to occupy the same position as their parents, and such ties linking parents' wealth to children's future earning prospects are even stronger in lower-income countries (Corak 2013, pp. 81–2).

It would therefore be both economically efficient and socially just to finance state services by shifting the tax burden from taxing income or consumption to taxing accumulated wealth. Yet, only 24 out of 37 OECD countries tax inheritance, estate and gifts across generations, and the levies are typically very low, accounting for only 0.5 per cent of total tax revenues on average for the 24 countries concerned (OECD 2021). There are important differences between countries, of course: in the US, only 0.2 per cent of estates are subject to inheritance taxes, and parents may transfer up to $11 million to their children exempt of taxes, while the figures are 48 per cent and $17,000 for the Region of Brussels-Capital in Belgium (OECD 2021). If governments truly want to finance the services they provide to the population, while at the same time increasing social mobility and ensuring true equal opportunities for all, they should start by addressing this.

The dominant narrative that presents growth as indispensable for addressing poverty thus diverts attention from the need to reduce wealth inequalities to the need to ensure a steady increase of total economic output. Another consequence of this narrative is, however, even more problematic – it is that certain forms of growth create the very poverty they are meant to reduce. The following section addresses this paradox.

The counter-productivity of growth

This is the counter-productivity of growth: not only is economic growth not a magic wand that, by miracle, will ensure that poverty will be reduced; it also may become counter-productive in the fight against poverty itself. This paradox, in which economic growth increases poverty, can be broken down into three propositions. First, growth will raise average consumption levels, and thus change the social norm governing what is expected from people in general, in a society in which overall affluence increases. This may lead to new forms of social exclusion. Second, in the name of raising the GDP, policy choices will be made that, in fact, will impede the fight against poverty, because of the means through which growth is pursued. Third, growth will worsen the various environmental crises that result from production and consumption patterns, with disproportionate impacts on people in poverty. We explore these propositions in turn.

Social norms of consumption: poverty as social exclusion

It is for a good reason that Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union (EU), defines the category of people 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion' (or 'AROPE') as including not only people who face severe material and social deprivation (unable to afford the basic necessities of life, and thus living in precarity) but also people who face 'monetary poverty', because they live on incomes that are low *relatively to those of others* (Eurostat 2024a). In the EU, an individual

is considered 'at risk of poverty' if her income is below 60 per cent of the median income of the country in which she lives (Eurostat 2024b).

Thus, poverty is not just an *absolute* notion, defined by whether one can afford what is essential to live a decent life – housing, education, healthcare and food. It is a *relative* notion: one is poor if one's income, in comparison to that of others, is so low as to lead to a sense of shame or exclusion. By introducing an element of social comparison, this statistical choice about how to define people 'at risk of poverty' corresponds to the experience of what it means to be 'poor' in affluent societies. People care not only about *how much they earn* and whether their income increases in line with the evolution of the cost of living, allowing them to acquire what they need to lead a decent life but also about whether they earn enough *relative to others*. This is at the heart of the rat race that is so characteristic of our competitive society. If people want to be able to avoid social exclusion, they must keep up with changing social expectations about consumption – about how you should dress or which extra-curricular activities you should be able to afford for your child.

The race for more never ends. It is a race, moreover, that is deeply frustrating for all who engage in it – in fact, for all members of society, with the exception of the ascetic. This is not only because, as noted, the signpost signalling the finish line is constantly being shifted further. It is also because as general affluence rises, consumption is increasingly about goods that are valuable because of the social comparison they serve, allowing the individual to signal himself as a full member of society, rather than because of the essential needs they satisfy (Hirsch 1977, p. 36; Brighouse and Swift 2006).

And it is, finally, because the items that one aspires to as productivity improves and as incomes increase, thus making these items more affordable, that they systematically disappoint once they are acquired. Indeed, our brains want not just comfort but excitement. It is not enough that all our needs be satisfied – we also want the pleasure that comes from moving from one state to another. While accelerating from 20 km/hr to 80 km/hr may provide that pleasure, driving along a highway at the constant speed of 80 km/hr is boring. So it is with consumer items – people crave novelty, and they will not be satisfied simply once all their needs are met (Scitovsky 1992). Indeed, this was how Albert Hirschman explained our tolerance for planned obsolescence – when short lifespans are deliberately built into the products we buy. If we continue to accept to have to change phones every three years and to have to buy a new car every 10 years, instead of demanding from producers that they provide goods that are much more resistant and easy to repair, might it not have something to do with the fact that while durable consumer goods with long lifespans provide a certain level of 'comfort', they only offer a single shot of 'pleasure' (Hirschman 1982, pp. 32–8)? The language of toxicology here is not only metaphoric, endocrinologists have recently documented what they describe as a true addiction to what is novel and brings about new forms of excitement (Lustig 2017).

The limits of growth are thus becoming increasingly clear. The long-held belief that the flourishing of each member of society depends on the constant expansion of the possibilities of material consumption is now less plausible than ever (Layard 2005). On the contrary, by increasing social expectations, the rise of overall affluence within a society may in fact increase modern poverty: the sense of exclusion one experiences when it becomes impossible to meet the rising standards of what makes you feel a full member of the community.

Policies for growth: poverty as a collateral casualty

The paradox of growth as a source of poverty can also be explained by the very tools governments have traditionally been relying upon in order to pursue growth. In 2020, the OECD set up

a group of experts to reflect on whether the increase of GDP should continue to guide fiscal and macroeconomic policies, or whether (and how) to take into account other considerations in such policies. The Advisory Group on a New Growth Narrative, as it came to be called, started by acknowledging that '[i]ncome is important, particularly for those whose incomes are low' (OECD 2020, p. 17). They noted, however, that in addition to income levels, a 'wide variety of other factors' will or will not allow for a 'fulfilled and flourishing life' resulting from a higher GDP, and they emphasised that whatever progress is expected from a higher GDP it 'can often be harmed by the ways it is generated – particularly for those on lower incomes and in more precarious work, and where private consumption is prioritised over public goods' (OECD 2020, p. 15).

This constitutes a powerful recognition that how we pursue growth matters. Certain tools used to pursue growth may cancel out, or even reverse, any benefits expected from growth; the quest for growth can become counterproductive, or as Daly put it, 'uneconomic'. Thus, for example, trade liberalisation is typically defended on the grounds that it will improve allocative efficiency, and thus contribute to total wealth creation. The EU-Mercosur agreement is thus justified in part by the argument that if the agriculture sector of the European Union (EU) were 'fully exposed to Mercosur competition, and vice versa in manufacturing, both blocs could see big so-called dynamic gains, i.e. ongoing improvements in productivity and innovation triggered by increased competition and assisted by scale economies', resulting in a 0.02 per cent GDP increase for the EU and a GDP increase for the Mercosur countries estimated at between 0.12 per cent and 0.16 per cent (Baltensperger and Dadush 2019 (based on Diao et al. 2003, pp. 6–7). However, quite apart from whether such estimates are realistic – they typically rely on global computable general equilibrium models, which include a naive assumption that all factors of production will be reallocated and that does not take into account unemployment – while some estimates of the impacts of the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement anticipate higher GDP gains (see, for instance, Estrades 2012), it is striking that the 'GDP increase' argument is silent about who gains and who loses, and about whether the losers will be adequately compensated.

Yet, even if it were true that trade liberalisation may lead to the GDP of the partner countries increasing, it certainly does not follow that it is an unmitigated good. Liberalisation will favour the most competitive sectors but not less competitive sectors that face competition from abroad. It will help large corporations, which are better equipped to achieve economies of scale and to control global supply chains, but not small businesses, including family-owned businesses serving local communities. It will work in favour of highly qualified workers in rich countries but not the least qualified workers in those countries, among whom globalisation has instead caused alarming rates of depression and anxiety, causing even suicide rates to increase and life expectancy to fall (De Schutter 2024b, para. 21). Indeed, even the workers in developing countries who are engaged in the most labour-intensive segments of global supply chains, and who are attractive to global investors because they are paid low wages, only benefit in the short term; in the long term, there is no future in a country that carves out its comparative advantage by keeping its workers poor.

Some countries, of course, have benefited from trade (or, more precisely, the export sector of some countries benefited), when they specialise in the right lines of production – in technologically advanced products protected behind intellectual property rights, in semi-finished goods, or in electronic appliances. Trade, however, historically, has been much less beneficial to countries that specialise in the production of raw commodities, in minerals or in agricultural products, or who only maintain their competitiveness on global markets by repressing wages. These countries lose in a model of development that is extractive and exploitative. And it is deeply unsatisfactory to respond that these countries can be compensated by official development assistance, by 'aid for trade' or by concessional lending. Such post hoc compensation is not a substitute for moving

towards a multilateral trading system that is more fair, and that does not lock countries into unsustainable forms of development.

Whether or not trade liberalisation is beneficial depends on much more than on whether it increases GDP, theoretically allowing those who gain to compensate the losers. States differ by the stage of development in which they find themselves, and by their position in the international division of labour. Sometimes, when their economy is poorly diversified, the manufacturing industry insufficiently developed, or the overall level of qualification of workers low, opening to trade means remaining locked into an unpromising niche in international trade, with some immediate benefits but limited future prospects. There is a trade-off, moreover, between efficiency driven by the search for competitiveness on the one hand, and resilience on the other hand. Efficiency requires economies of scale, specialisation and uniformity, whereas resilience requires diversity, producing more of what is consumed locally and consuming more of what is produced locally, and reducing dependency on imports to satisfy local needs. The current imperative is to build not only economies that are competitive but also economies that are resilient to shocks – including climate-related shocks and economic shocks linked, for instance, to a sudden fall of the value of exports or a sudden increase in the price of imports, or to the disruption chains as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic or following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. None of this is captured by the GDP indicator.

The example of trade liberalisation as a means to create growth merely serves to illustrate a more general point – as long as we focus on GDP increase, we will make the wrong policy choices that will worsen the very problems of social exclusion and inequalities that growth was meant to address. Governments may be tempted, for instance, to seek to attract investors in the extractive industry, by granting 'tax holidays' or specific privileges to companies exploiting the subsoil, a tendency which is particularly suspect in the absence of transparency and accountability of the public officials negotiating the agreement – and that is especially damaging where investors' rights are protected by specific provisions of investment treaties or free trade agreements, locking host governments into choices that may not benefit the population (De Schutter et al. 2012).

Yet, while the arrival of investors in the extractive industry can boost total economic output, thus increasing the GDP, it can also worsen inequalities and tensions in the country, a phenomenon that has been documented to such an extent that it is labelled the 'resource curse'. This counterproductivity is largely explained by the very nature of the resources concerned and the means of exploiting them. The exploitation of mineral resources typically takes the form of large-scale projects in which a small number of individuals control vast amounts of wealth. The capture of the benefits can therefore be highly unequal, unless affirmative measures are taken to ensure that they will be fairly distributed across a large number. Moreover, natural resources are non-renewable. They are 'assets in the ground' whose value depends on technology, market prices and political risk. The exploitation of mineral resources thus should be seen as the consumption of capital, rather than only of a stream of incomes (Humphreys et al. 2007, p. 7). The temptation is huge for those in power both to exploit those resources in order to create as much wealth as possible within the shortest possible time (for they do not know for how long they will stay in power), and to sell off the right to exploit resources to the highest bidder (in order to cash in immediately the equivalent of all future income streams that could result from exploiting the resource), sometimes with scant attention being paid to the long-term impacts or to the interests of the local communities.

Many other examples could be given, from the flexibilisation of labour to tax reforms aimed at attracting investment, and the removal of regulatory requirements aimed at protecting the environment, to giving the priority to servicing the public debt above investing in health and education in order to maintain the country's reputation as a reliable borrower on financial markets. All these measures are presented as aiming at stimulating growth. Yet, they are not necessarily conducive

to the realisation of economic and social rights. While, in theory, the increase of total economic output could facilitate such realisation, by increasing the fiscal space available, policy reforms that aim at increasing the GDP without being specifically geared towards the progressive realisation of human rights may have the exact opposite effect.

Environmental impacts of growth: poverty as environmental destruction

The third reason why growth can undermine efforts aimed at the reduction of poverty is because growth cannot be decoupled from environmental impacts. In 2019, a systemic review concluded that 'there is no empirical evidence supporting the existence of . . . an absolute, global, permanent, and sufficiently fast and large decoupling of environmental pressures (both resources and impacts) from economic growth' (Parrique et al. 2019, p. 31). Indeed, absolute decoupling is not even occurring at the speed required in the limited area of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, which is only one of the nine planetary boundaries within which we need to remain for Earth stability and life support conducive to human welfare and societal development (Richardson et al. 2023). A review of the performance of 36 OECD jurisdictions during the period 2013–2019 (Vogel and Hickel 2023) concluded that while 11 countries have managed to achieve absolute decoupling between GDP increases and GHG emissions during that period, the speed at which this is taking place will not suffice without the carbon budget resulting from the 2015 Paris Agreement taking into account equity considerations. Based on their decoupling achievements during the period considered, the 11 jurisdictions having achieved absolute decoupling of GHG emissions from GDP growth would require 223 years on average to reduce their respective 2022 emissions by 95 per cent, by the end of which period they would have burned, on average, 27 times their respective remaining post-2022 national fair-shares of the global carbon budget (if we are to remain below the 1.5°C in global heating) in the process (Vogel and Hickel 2023).

This confirms the conclusions of the *Sixth Assessment Report* presented in 2022 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Dhakal et al. 2023). The IPCC noted that while 23 countries (representing 20% of a total sample of 116 countries) have decoupled consumption-based emissions (CBEs) from GDP during the period 2015–2018, through a combination of outsourcing carbon-intensive production and improvements in production efficiency and energy mix, such decoupling is often short-lived, and it has mostly occurred in countries (mainly from the EU and Northern America) with high per capita GDP and high per capita CO_2 emissions. Another 67 (58%) countries, including China and India, have relatively decoupled GDP and CBEs between 2015 and 2018, reflecting a slower growth in emissions than GDP. A further 19 (16%) countries, including South Africa and Nepal, have experienced no decoupling between GDP and CBEs from 2015 to 2018. In these countries, a further increase of GDP will likely lead to higher emissions, if they follow the historical trend without substantive improvement in efficiency of production and energy use. And the IPCC (Dhakal et al. 2023, para 2.3.3) warns that:

> although absolute decoupling has reduced annual emissions [in one fifth of the sample of 116 countries], the remaining emissions are still contributing to an increase in atmospheric carbon concentration. Absolute decoupling is not sufficient to avoid consuming the remaining CO_2 emission budget under the global warming limit of 1.5°C or 2°C and to avoid climate breakdown.

Thus, while decarbonisation of economies is occurring, it is mostly limited to high-income countries that already have a high level of GHG emissions per capita, and it is certainly not occurring

at the speed required. Similar instances of absolute decoupling are not occurring, however, with regard to the other major ecological crises, such as biodiversity loss and resource use. Green growth is not happening.

People in poverty are the most immediately and the most seriously affected by environmental degradation. It is they, therefore, that will lose the most if we continue to entertain the myth of 'green growth' as a pretext to delay bolder action to slow down the metabolism of the economy. As noted in a report of the World Bank (2022, p. 12), this is particularly the case for climate change:

> Climate change can deepen monetary poverty through its impact on agricultural yields, food prices, health, labor productivity, and other factors. . . . Higher vulnerability of people in or close to poverty is sometimes linked to higher exposure to risk – for example, through dependency on agricultural income or low-quality housing. But it can also be linked to a lower ability to prepare and respond, due to a lack of savings and access to borrowing, remittances, social protection, insurance, and other support systems, and a lack of voice in decision making.

Climate disruptions are not, however, the only threats linked to environmental degradation that will disproportionately affect people in poverty. People in poverty are also the first victims of air pollution, because they generally live closer to the sources of pollution (Lucas et al. 2004) and because they live in small, overcrowded dwellings that are more difficult to ventilate properly (Combat poverty 2019, p. 13). They are the most at risk from landslides or flooding, because they are forced to live wherever they can afford housing (Bullard et al. 2007; Schweitzer and Zhou 2010). As recalled by the Chennai Guidance for the integration of biodiversity and poverty eradication, elaborated under the framework of the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, they are also more dependent on ecosystems for their livelihoods (Suich et al. 2015). Globally, 1.2 billion jobs (40% of total world employment), most of which are in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, rely directly on the effective management and sustainability of a healthy environment (ILO 2018, p. 7). People in poverty, including the 476 million indigenous peoples (ILO 2017) are, therefore, the most affected by climate disruptions (Alston 2019). How credible, then, are poverty eradication strategies that destroy the very foundations of the livelihoods of people in poverty, albeit in the name of creating wealth?

The degrowth approach to poverty reduction

Thus, the search for growth as a means to eradicate poverty is misguided. It is, at best, an unnecessary distraction; at worst, it can become counterproductive: in rich countries, growth as a means to address poverty has passed its sell-by date. The alternative pathway is to focus on reducing income and wealth inequalities, by combining tax reform towards increased progressivity and, as already noted, a shift from income and consumption taxes to wealth taxes, and wage reform. And it is to redirect production towards satisfying needs, and towards the full realisation of economic and social rights, rather than allowing resource use to be guided by demand. The two reforms are inter-related and mutually supportive.

Reducing inequalities: wages reform

While tax reform has been addressed already, the reduction of income inequalities by reforming wages deserves further comment. Under human rights law, workers have a right to 'fair wages',

as stipulated under article 7(a) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR 2016, para. 10), this means that wages should reflect:

> not only the output of the work but also the responsibilities of the worker, the level of skill and education required to perform the work, the impact of the work on the health and safety of the worker, specific hardships related to the work and the impact on the worker's personal and family life.

In practice, however, the levels of wages are the result of bargaining processes between workers and employers, in which the position of workers, especially with low levels of qualification and whose jobs can be easily outsourced, has been significantly weakened since the 1980s. This is the result of a number of factors, including globalisation and automation of work.

There is another and more fundamental problem. Wages are broadly aligned with how the 'productivity' of the worker is assessed or, in a variation on the same idea, with what the end purchaser of the good or service provided will pay. The most important contributions of work to overall well-being, however, are not necessarily in the added monetary value it creates. Unpaid care workers in particular, but also workers performing essential functions on which society depends, are typically underpaid, because their contributions are insufficiently valued, and because the services they provide have the nature of a public good, for which the beneficiaries are unwilling or unable to pay. These workers moreover provide services that serve communities, including people living in poverty, who cannot afford to pay for such services. As a result of how work is currently valued in the labour market, the more the work serves the needs of the poor, the least well it will be remunerated.

The low remuneration of workers providing care can also be attributed to the fact that many of their tasks were traditionally performed by women within households and communities, without remuneration; even once these tasks were paid for, the wages were set at a low level, reflecting such a lack of recognition of the value to society of the work of reproduction (as contrasted with production) (Palier 2020). For instance, the activities of domestic workers, such as cooking, cleaning, washing and caregiving, are undervalued both because they are oftentimes considered 'unproductive' (ILO 2016, p. 5) and because they have traditionally been assumed by women – whereas they are a valuable and necessary labour which the functioning of communities and entire economies depend on (Bamu-Chipunza 2018).

In a post-growth world, in which well-being is prioritised above GDP increase, this should be changed. In order to be 'fair', the remuneration should reflect not only the economic value created by the worker but also the contribution to society of the work performed (Bueno 2022, p. 366; Dermine and Dumont 2022, p. 267). Prospective workers otherwise will seek the kind of training, and workers provide the goods and services, that will serve not the needs of the community, and particularly those of low-income groups, but those of the most affluent only. Thus, instead of designing schemes to help people in poverty, economists will become traders; instead of producing food for the community, farmers will produce cash crops for which there is a demand on the high-value markets of rich countries; instead of building low-cost social housing, architects will aim at building mansions for the ultra-rich; and so on. The result is not only that the incentives are distorted against serving the needs of the poorest groups within society, and that an enormous human potential is wasted while it could serve societal needs. It is also that, as goods or services for these groups are undersupplied, their prices may increase, resulting in an artificial scarcity.

To remedy this, work that is of higher societal value should be better remunerated. In a study on the jobs that the COVID-19 pandemic showed to be 'essential', the ILO (2023, p. 62) found that 'essential workers' earn, on average, 26 per cent less than other workers, and that only two-thirds of the gap could be explained by differences in education and experience. In other terms, the workers providing the most vital services to society, in areas such as food production and retail, healthcare, cleaning and sanitation, or transport, are underpaid.

To combat this trend, states could draw up a list of goods and services the provision of which is essential and of high societal value, and ensure that the workers involved in such provision are paid fair wages (beyond the minimum wage allowing them to meet their basic needs). They could also, conversely, draw up a list of professions that are currently highly paid despite their negative externalities (such as those of traders encouraging speculation on financial markets, workers involved in the extraction of fossil energy, in pesticides production, in plastic production, or in the tobacco industry, or workers of the advertising industry) and cap high remunerations in those sectors. In order for these mandates to be economically viable in the private for-profit sector, tax incentives and subsidies could be provided, compensating for the increased costs of labour in the sectors that society seeks to support, while at the same time higher income taxes would penalise the excessively high remuneration of professions causing high negative externalities.

A human rights economy

The main reason to combat inequalities is because, as long as strong inequalities persist, the most affluent groups of society will be able to command resources that, as a result, are not available to meet the basic needs of people in poverty. The more the production system is guided by demand, and the more income differentials are allowed to persist, the more resources will be diverted to satisfying the desires of the rich, rather than the needs of the poor. The economy thus is less efficient in meeting those needs if it tolerates high levels of inequality.

There are other reasons to make the reduction of inequalities a priority in the search for a post-growth model of development. A second argument in favour of such prioritisation is that the accumulation of wealth within a narrow elite has significant impacts, particularly on greenhouse emissions, due to the investment choices of most wealthiest groups. Whereas the top 1 per cent of the world's population has been responsible for 23 per cent of the total increase in emissions since 1990 (while the bottom 50% of the world population has been responsible for only 16% of all emissions growth), the bulk of the emissions from the richest result from their investments rather than from their consumption (Chancel 2022).

Third, reducing inequalities would put a brake on the most unsustainable lifestyles, that only the richest segments of the population, located mostly in rich countries, can afford. Globally, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the world's population (two-thirds of whom live in high-income regions) contribute about 36–45 per cent of global GHG emissions, while the lifestyle consumption emissions of the middle-income and poorest citizens in emerging economies are between 5 and 50 times below their counterparts in high-income countries (Dhakal et al. 2023, paras. 2.6.1 and 2.6.2). It is not just the wealth of the elite that is the problem, due to the kind of consumption patterns it allows, but inequality itself, since inequality encourages status competition through material consumption. Indeed, beyond the threshold of basic needs that human rights define as entitlements, we 'want' material things not because of the comfort they provide but for the message we send to those around us: unequal societies fuel a permanent race for status through consumption (De Schutter et al. 2023). By contrast, in more equal societies, or in societies in which social positioning can be signalled by means other than consumption, the

growth needed to feed the work-spend-consume cycle becomes less necessary (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, p. 226).

Fourth and finally, income and wealth inequalities have political consequences. Economic dominance is easily converted into political influence, allowing the richest groups of the population and the most powerful economic actors to veto any change that might challenge the status quo they benefit from (Gilens 2012; Roncaglia 2024). In more unequal societies moreover, civic engagement is generally lower, and differentials in access to information and power discourage people in poverty from mobilising – although they are the ones most affected by the lack of action on issues such as air and water pollution, against which they cannot protect themselves (Boyce 2018, 2019).

Thus, inequalities lead to a vicious cycle. They lead to a financialisation of the economy that is a major source of increased GHG emissions, and they stimulate the adoption of consumption patterns by the rich (larger houses, more powerful cars, exotic trips), who compete against marginalised communities and low-income households for the use of scarce resources. These latter communities and households are priced out from this auctioning process, and they may ultimately be unable to satisfy their needs, even where resources would otherwise be sufficient to ensure decent standards of living for all. The lifestyles of the rich, driven by status competition and conspicuous consumption, fuel the consumption-driven model of our current global economic system, which relies on the ever-increasing production and purchase of consumer goods to sustain economic growth. Such lifestyles are entirely incompatible with the need to reduce environmental pressures. Yet, their control of assets allows powerful economic actors, who thrive on the status quo, to veto any significant reform that might threaten their dominant position.

Conclusion

The Pact for the Future adopted on 22 September 2024 reaffirms the need to 'urgently develop measures of progress on sustainable development that complement or go beyond gross domestic product' (UN 2024, p. 34). Indicators alone, however, while useful, remain insufficient. What matters is the reorientation of the economy, of our ways of producing and consuming.

This, indeed, is what a human rights economy would look like: one that values what counts, not simply by adopting a new set of well-being indicators that go 'beyond GDP', as many countries are already doing, but also by rewarding work that is socially useful, and more generally, by investing in the satisfaction of basic needs – not in the maximisation of profits for the benefit of the few. In rich countries, the correlation has been lost between economic growth and the eradication of poverty. Where the economy is already obese, it needs not to put on additional weight but instead to strengthen its resilience where it matters, and to trim down wherever possible. It is thus conceived – as a democratically driven, conscious choice to focus efforts on satisfying needs corresponding to economic and social rights – that degrowth can serve the cause of poverty alleviation.

The roadmap towards such an objective includes strengthening the social and solidary economy, identifying new sources of financing for state services that do not depend on growth, better-valuing care work and better-aligning wages with the social utility of work (De Schutter 2024a). The overall objective is to expand the toolbox of governments in the fight against poverty. This should allow a move beyond a grow-tax-transfer approach to poverty reduction (the dominant post-market model to combating poverty), to focus more on pre-market measures (including investing in early childhood education and care) and on market reforms (to make markets more inclusive). Human rights can provide a guide.

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27

IMPERIAL AND SOLIDARY MODES OF LIVING

Alternatives to eco-imperialism

Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen

The term degrowth is used in manifold ways – for a movement or an ensemble of movements, for a field of research and a community of scholars, for concrete initiatives and experiences – and, in the broadest sense, for a vision or utopia for another society. A society, or societies, that would enable freedom, justice and a 'good living for all' without destroying the bio-physical conditions of social life on earth (Éric Pinault, Chapter 2, this volume). That means an organisation of social life with very different institutions, logics, imaginaries as well as societal and power relations, including societal–nature relations. The transformations required to create such organisations of social life are subject to historical and current experiences, uncertain futures, social and technological innovations, and very different and plural forms of knowledge (Kallis et al. 2018; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018).

Despite the many different perspectives on degrowth, the basic common denominator of degrowth as a critical approach seems to be that the capitalist and industrialist *growth imperative* to organise many aspects of social life is one of the major problems of our times and needs to be overcome – in the Global North *and* in the Global South (Lang 2024; Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019). Societies organised around the capitalist growth imperative are based on, and reinforce, social relations in which life opportunities and spaces of action, as well as assets and income, are distributed unevenly (Parrique, Chapter 3, this volume). Capitalism guarantees economically, politically, and culturally manifold social inclusion and exclusion (Brand 2018). A transition to a society liberated from the growth imperative would have to tackle different forms of social domination, such as class, race, gender, and unequal relations between Global North and South, and domination of nature.

In this chapter, we will elaborate this point by introducing the concept 'imperial mode of living' in the singular to emphasise, despite enormously different manifestations, its structural aspect. This concept precisely clarifies that the capitalist growth imperative is a key element of manifold social relations of domination and that the imperial mode of living is intrinsically linked to this. After having introduced the concept and briefly analysed the 'eco-imperial tensions' that have been increasing recently, we propose a worldview and strategic horizon under the header of 'solidary modes of living' in the plural to highlight the irrefutably pluriverse character of alternatives to the imperial mode of living. The chapter ends with a discussion of strategic issues.

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Imperial mode of living and increasing eco-imperial tensions[1]

The concept 'imperial mode of living' draws our attention to the fact that capitalism does not only imply uneven development in time and space but also a constant and accelerating universalisation of a Western production model (Latouche 2005; Svampa 2016; Acosta and Brand 2017; Lang 2024). The logic of liberal markets since the 19th century, and especially since World War II, is inscribed into everyday practices that are normalised and usually unconsciously reproduced. They are a main driver of the ecological crisis and persisting global and societal inequalities – and, at the same time, a major barrier to transformative change.

The persistence and deepening of the imperial mode of living implies that the everyday practices of people, including individual and societal orientations as well as identities, rely heavily on the principally unlimited appropriation of resources, on a disproportionate claim to global and local ecosystems and sinks, and on cheap labour from elsewhere. This availability of commodities is organised through the world market, trade relations and foreign indebtedness of many countries of the Global South, backed by military force and/or the asymmetric relations of economic and political forces as they have been inscribed in international institutions. The concrete conditions of production of many essential commodities are usually not visible. For example, as far as agricultural products are concerned, McMichael (2009, p. 612) speaks of 'food from nowhere'. Another dimension of its reproduction is the erasure and ignorance of Europe's imperial history.

The imperial mode of living contributes to safeguarding social stability in the Global North and provides a hegemonic orientation in many societies of the Global South. Cultural imperialism, largely reproduced by (social) media, is important here. The social relations underlying this mode of living and possible ways to transform them are hardly politically disputed and insufficiently reflected in current political debates, official reports and research.

The imperial mode of living is not socially neutral. Often people with high levels of education, relatively high incomes and high environmental consciousness have the highest per capita resource use, while classes with lower environmental consciousness, but also lower income, use fewer resources. Moreover, the concept does not refer only to lifestyles of different social milieus. It aims to recognise the dominant patterns of production, distribution and consumption as well as discourses and related orientations of 'a good life' in the Global North and, increasingly, in countries of the Global South.

Thus, the concept helps us to understand that, *first*, despite the crisis of neoliberal-imperial globalisation, resource- and energy-intensive everyday practices persist and continue to have severe socio-ecological consequences. *Second*, the hegemonic – largely accepted – forms of living are closely linked to the dominant mode of production and capital's valorisation strategies, to politics and the very structures of the state, and to prevailing orientations and actions. *Third*, global environmental politics is largely ineffective, and we experience a severe 'crisis of crisis management' because it does not focus the core of the crisis – the dominant patterns of production and consumption. The very structure of national and international politics is deeply linked to the dominant mode of production and living. *Fourth*, despite all the rhetoric, we experience a fostering of (neo-)imperialist strategies with respect to natural resources and sinks in order to maintain existing power relations and interests. *Finally*, the hegemonic character of the imperial mode of living – which changes over time – is one starting point for counter-hegemonic struggles; beside the blocking of unsustainable capital and state strategies, forms of living must be transformed. Another entry point for alternatives is the irreducible existence of more solidary and socio-ecological modes of production and living that might become universalised.

More recently, the reproduction of the imperial mode of living has become ever more precarious. This is not least due to the fact that the 'external sphere' on which it depends – non-commodified nature in the form of raw materials, ecosystems and sinks, cheap or often unpaid labour – is threatened with being exhausted. While the imperial mode of living is still deeply rooted in the societies of the Global North, a growing number of Southern countries has pursued a capitalist growth path, with the respective resource- and emission-intensive patterns of production and consumption becoming hegemonic in their societies too. In other words, what we have been experiencing is a global spread of the imperial mode of living, and attempts at a universalisation of production and consumption patterns which, for socio-ecological reasons, cannot be generalised. This is even aggravated by recent attempts to decarbonise advanced capitalist economies, given that the decarbonisation of transport, energy sectors and industrial production requires huge amounts of metals and materials like green hydrogen. The competition for these has increased and is about to increase further, with the result of rising 'eco-imperial tensions'.

These eco-imperial tensions are becoming a structural element of international politics and are, therefore, not just temporary but permanent. These tensions result, among other things, from the continually expanding dynamics of capitalism and the correspondingly steady increase in the extraction and consumption of metallic, mineral and fossil raw materials combined. Access to 'cheap' raw materials ensures the global production of textiles, food, cars, and other everyday consumer and luxury goods, and enables services such as flying and digital communication. However, cheap raw material access is also the prerequisite for the digital and 'green' *twin transition*, which is changing the technological basis of capitalist economies. There are plans to increase resource efficiency and thus reduce the amount of resources required. However, these efficiency gains will be completely or at least partially 'eaten up' or overcompensated for by the inevitably expanding economy under capitalism (Hickel and Kallis 2020), so growing tensions in this area are inevitable.

The *resource frontiers* are constantly being expanded accordingly, particularly with respect to fossil fuels. The deep sea is currently being tapped for the extraction of resources. On land, expansion is creating tensions and conflicts particularly at the local level, say with forests for timber, groundwater for potable water and edible fish in rivers and seas. Globally, most raw materials, including 'critical' and 'strategic' ones, are currently available to the extent required. However, questions arise as to the prices at which they can be extracted and fed into the capitalist valorisation process. A variety of political and economic interests play a role here – between producer and consumer countries, between different companies along the supply chains, between the affected populations and between powerful economic and political players. This is not only about the extraction and transport of raw materials for further utilisation but also about the control of raw materials, the necessary infrastructure, and the pricing processes. This is why there are always manifest conflicts, especially in the extraction areas.

In the face of growing upheaval and increasingly violent externalisations, we recognise – politically and analytically – the urgent need for genuine alternatives that lead to solidary modes of living, justice (both social and ecological), peace and democracy. Of course, there cannot be a Master plan for this.

Solidary modes of living

Degrowth is about radical emancipatory socio-ecological transformations 'by design', not 'by disaster', because the latter would very likely imply a more-or-less violent shifting of the burdens,

intensifying inequality, and would not stop the destructive dynamics. Transformation by design is about choice, radical and direct decision-making, conflicts and alliances, expectation and desires, long-term thinking and action, dealing with the root causes of problems and crises, not their symptoms, it's about how 'to see woods rather than trees' (Freedman 2013, p. ix). Degrowth is a narrative or imaginary to change social discourse, power relations and ways of thinking, and also to promote collective action. It is, therefore, a means of thinking about developing and communicating strategies. While the degrowth perspective is mainly formulated against the background of experiences in the Global North, globally, degrowth is part of a plurality of approaches, of a pluriverse (Kothari et al. 2019) which have the goal of fostering radical emancipatory socio-ecological transformations. In that sense, the degrowth perspective is close to the term 'solidary mode of living', which we proposed some years ago, and manifold experiences in this respect (Brand and Wissen 2021, pp. 183–207).

We argue that changes to the imperial mode of living must begin at different points. It is about creating different political rules, social expectations (say regarding what is essential for people's everyday life) and general approaches that push back against capitalist expansion and appropriation *and* make solidary modes of living possible. It is also important to change subjectivities, to alleviate and reduce the injustice experienced by human beings and to shift power relationships. It is about the specific dimensions of life – nutrition, housing, clothing, health and mobility – beyond the disciplinary practices that support capitalist expansion, appropriation and the entrenchment of social hierarchies.

The processes through which solidary modes of living will spread will happen both in changes to social conditions and in people's own transformation of their ways of thinking and acting. Strategically, meaningful change goes beyond the many and necessarily defensive struggles to contain and repel imperial practices. This also means that a fundamental social transformation – different from a widespread assumption in the debate on a green economy – will by no means see only winners. Many powerful people will lose, on various scales – with rich people especially being challenged. And they must be challenged, because what they do is not generalisable and is carried out at the expense of a greater number of other people.

We suggest understanding the many already practised alternatives as part of the search for solidary modes of living, for a very different – namely just, democratic, peaceful and truly ecological – model of prosperity beyond capitalist, patriarchal and racist impositions, beyond the domination and exploitation of nature. The contours of solidary modes of living are present in many current discussions and practices that fundamentally challenge society from its margins. It is important to notice this, cultivate it, and give the alternatives the opportunity to stabilise and reverberate. The emergence of these solidary modes of living will be uneven, harbour unknowable challenges and take place subtly, in fits and starts, but also, crucially, through conflict.

The central normative reference point of critical analysis and emancipatory politics is a good living for all that does not destroy its own biophysical basis. Any particular mode of living must be capable of serving as a generalisable model without externalising its preconditions and costs, without exploiting other people and without destroying its own foundations. Specifically, this means a drastic reduction in resource consumption and emissions, the implementation of consumption corridors (Fuchs et al. 2022), as well as the transformation of political, economic and social structures to solidary forms in our use of nature, production and work, collective coexistence, through open relocalisation (Liegey et al. 2016), decision-making and conflict resolution.

The common thread among many of these demands and associated movements is their direction towards use value (as distinct from exchange value), towards fair and just access to the means

and conditions of a decent life. They aim at promoting the necessary forms of organising the economy and politics, coexistence and subjectivity. In doing so, they suppress the imperatives of profit making, and the accumulation of capital and power. They are, thus, part of a gradual defeat of the imperial mode of living – a defeat that hopes to arrive at a solidary mode through conflicts and learning processes. The kinds of change sought entail the redistribution of power, income and wealth, and, implicitly or explicitly, challenge the ownership and control of the means of production, and raise the question of where and how society should invest – and where it should not. The emergence of solidary modes of living will go hand in hand with a deepening of democracy, and the expansion of economic democracy in particular.

The alternative proposals and practical approaches are equally diverse – strengthening public housing and demands for a 'right to the city'; transition towns; urban gardening; environmental and climate justice; withdrawal from coal and the Ende Gelände movement in Germany against fossil fuels; resistance against the Keystone Pipeline System in Canada and the United States; the ZAD de Notre-Dame-Des-Landes and Les Soulèvement de la Terre movement in France; democratising and socialising the energy supply; food sovereignty and organic farming; strengthening animal rights and (in Latin America) the rights of nature, of the commons and of commoning; the right to 'good work' and a basic income; distributing paid and unpaid reproductive labour in a mode of solidarity; the debt cancellation movement; municipalist movement; low-tech; permaculture; free seeds movement; free software and informational self-determination; and social policy as infrastructure or socio-ecological infrastructure. Institutional alternatives include the regulation of financial markets, or the promotion of 'urban mobility rehabilitation' of an infrastructure that has been stunted for decades in favour of automobiles. Overarching concepts for these approaches include degrowth and post-growth; post-development and post-extractivism; the care revolution and care strikes; deceleration and spare time; autonomy; frugal abundance; sobriety and voluntary simplicity; conviviality; the 'four-in-one' perspective; global social rights and a good life for all. Even this extensive list is only a partial one – many concepts are presented in Kothari et al. (2019) and by the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA undated).

Everyday aspects of alternatives

Our proposal to link the hegemonic and expanding, albeit crisis-deepening, character of capitalism in our societies with the 'imperial mode of living' has an important implication when it comes to alternatives. Particularly feminist political economy and political ecology insisted on this point (Barca 2020). Radical socio-ecological transformations can only be achieved by a reorganisation of society according to entirely different forms of living together. With these, new subjectivities will emerge and lead to 'new habits'. The inscription of the imperial mode of living into everyday life and onto the bodies of its subjects is quite strategic on the part of private companies and the state and suggests that many alternatives might sometimes develop perfectly unspectacularly. These alternatives evade today's norms of living and consuming, cease to follow both explicit and implicit rules, and no longer accept, or simply interrupt, certain practices and social suggestions. Schoolchildren have the Coca-Cola machines banned from school, factory-farmed meat (and meat eating generally) are increasingly rejected or avoided, while owning a car – or a 'normal' career – are no longer desirable.

Counter-hegemony against the imperial mode of living thus implies disputes about other rules, political and economic strategies, investments and control over the means of production. And it means rejecting to live certain forms of everyday life or even abstaining from them entirely. The

motivation for these changes can include unfulfilled desires and blocked opportunities to conduct a fulfilling life.

Thus, it becomes clear that degrowth and a solidary mode of living, respectively, as a worldview, concrete experiences and strategic horizon is not just a question of actors and alliances (even though this is important) but also of changing our everyday institutions. More explicitly, organisations and practices of public political, economic and cultural organisations, private firms, and everyday working and living practices of people that are currently, in many respects, destructive. In that sense, besides changing the socio-political conditions and power relations – which is usually the aim of social movements and a collective identity is a condition for this – socio-ecological transformations imply transforming the everyday, subjectivities and imaginaries, and very different forms of material reproduction (the 'economy'). Transformation is also about learning and education, about changing lifestyles and practices (which are only indirectly the object of strategies), about not being afraid to making mistakes, and about being open to many things that we cannot yet imagine.

Global dimensions

One basic mechanism of the imperial mode of living lies in externalising its socially and ecologically problematic conditions and consequences. That externalisation systematically produces poor working conditions and exploitation, authoritarian political and social conditions, precarious living conditions and ecological destruction. Abolishing the different mechanisms of externalisation is, without a doubt, one of the most difficult tasks faced in the struggle for solidary modes of living – and has massive implications for younger and future generations facing the long-term impacts of us not sharing and saving finite resources today. One of the prerequisites for achieving this task is to make externalisation *visible* as a crucial component of the imperial mode of living. This means elucidating and sharing the insight that one's own privileges are based not only on exploitation and destruction 'at home' but also 'elsewhere'. This information is present everywhere and every day, but neither exists as knowledge considered socially relevant nor leads to adequate action. Practising empathy is initially as banal as it is hard.

Solidary modes of living are always solidary modes of (re)production and must change the highly fragmented supply and value chains and their embedded imperatives of capitalist valorisation. This is necessary because the externalisation of the negative implications of the imperial mode of living causes numerous conflicts and environmental destruction. This action will go hand in hand with recognising and supporting the various demands and struggles in our own societies and elsewhere, as well as for future generations. It means empathy and practical solidarity with those all over the world who oppose the impositions of the imperial mode of living. And it means recognising the dignity of people 'at home' and beyond one's own borders who stand up against humiliation and dehumanisation and fight for a better life. That is the substance of the phrase 'Enough is enough!' ('*Ya basta!*') used by the Mexican Zapatistas in 1994, and that's why it has resonated worldwide. Their call was not primarily to practise solidarity with the uprising but to create links between many different emancipatory struggles and work together in different parts of the world, and to find alternatives to the imperial mode of living. The creation of solidary modes of living is a multiple and concrete question of enacting our humanity.

In a broad sense, this means not surrendering to the wrong-headed promises of prosperity based on capitalist and hierarchical externalisation and, instead, creating and living forms of abundance based on justice, solidarity and sustainability as in 'frugal abundance' (Plomteux, Chapter 17, this

volume). Thus, there are many alternative proposals, demands, practices and specific as well as comprehensive strategies – the latter in the sense of switch points, pursuing not quite familiar or known paths, while also excluding other known ones. Only in hindsight will we know when and how such changes result in 'systemic effects'. A case in point is the dynamic Latin American initiative 'Eco-social and Intercultural Pact of the South', operating since 2020, whose experiences of, and demands for, radical alternatives have been condensed into very specific claims and proposals (Pacto Ecosocial e Intercultural del Sur undated; Lang 2024; Pantilimon 2023).

Political projects for solidary modes of living must draw from and combine many things; they must be tangible and attractive. Alliances of the middle and the lower classes will tend to carry this project. We would hope, however, that dissident progressive elites will increasingly recognise the seriousness of the situation and act accordingly. In any case, it is necessary to reflect on the danger of coopting or 'greenwashing' alternatives, and to draw a clear line against racist, exploitative, patriarchal, violent and destructive socio-political projects.

Some strategic implications: transformative cells

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights – and author of Chapter 26, this volume – Olivier De Schutter (2024, p. 1) reported to the Human Rights Council, that:

> The ideology of "growthism" should not become a distraction from the urgent need both to provide more of the goods and services that enhance well-being and to reduce the production of what is unnecessary or even toxic. As long as the economy is driven mainly by profit maximization, it will respond to the demand expressed by the richest groups of society, leading to extractive forms of production that worsen social exclusion in the name of creating more wealth, and it will fail to fulfil the rights of those in poverty.

Degrowth ideas are becoming increasingly relevant for official policy processes and are explicitly linked to questions of power imbalances. Another recent and prominent example is the work on 'climate' or 'ecological inequality' by Lucas Chancel et al. (2023). To foster socio-ecological transformations in this direction needs material and immaterial resources, the effective application of strategies and their appropriate sequence (Freedman 2013, pp. ix–x). In that sense, degrowth is an integral and important part of emancipatory debates, strategies and real social change in order to strengthen solidary modes of living. We need 'a plan of collective action intended to accomplish goals within a particular context' (Asara et al. 2015). At the same time, long- and mid-term strategies need to consider contingencies and the need for adaptation to shifting situations. Alliances and engagement with institutions are a necessary condition of such a broad change. Many other actors and changes within organisations do not run under the header of degrowth yet might share many of its aims. Explicit degrowth actors should engage with others and build alliances (Burkhart et al. 2020; Barlow et al. 2022).

The strength of the degrowth perspective is that it insists on the necessity of having a general idea of a society that enables a good living for all (Alexandra Köves, Chapter 25, this volume). There are important principles, such as collectively defined forms of self-limitation (Muraca 2013; Brand et al. 2021), but we do not know a more or less clear 'end' beyond visions that, in a way, manifest positive experiences today (Konzeptwerk Neue Ökonomie 2020). What might be needed instead is an overall orientation of emancipation, which, even now, might not have a name – a

social atmosphere of acting and fighting, of saying 'no' and of starting something radically different and with emancipatory principles, purposes and strategies. Degrowth strategies need to be 'translated' into dominant institutional paradigms through concrete micro-strategies and struggles against oligarchic and fossil fuel-based forces. For instance, to shift the growth dynamics of a state bureaucracy (be it a ministry, a university or a public enterprise) requires the action of many people and groups within various apparatuses.

The state, companies and interest groups are not homogeneous. There are internal disputes about how to assess specific problems and crises, identifying where there is a concrete need for action and how to act appropriately. We see these instances as important areas for emancipatory change processes as part of a socio-ecological transformation. A decisive starting point for change is therefore heterogeneity, the sometimes-contradictory nature of organisations not only in terms of the actors involved but also in terms of objectives and organisational action. We can extend these considerations to public and private companies; subordinate state authorities; schools and universities; churches and social associations; foundations; media and other organisations.

Assessing the potential for change, then launching smart initiatives, forming alliances where necessary and joining forces within organisations could be done through 'transformative cells' (Brand and Wissen 2026). By this we mean long-term collective action by groups of people in organised interest groups, schools, or in the care and health sectors. They can initiate and promote concrete changes in their professional environment. This creates the ability to act, so that dissatisfaction with conditions in the local area and in society does not end in frustration. This is how 'radical-reformist' approaches to reorganisation can emerge.

Even if the state and its apparatus are subject to a different logic than educational institutions or interest groups, these forms of change also apply to parts of the state bureaucracy itself. Here, 'transformative cells' could form in order to advance socio-ecological projects against resistance in the face of limited controllability.

For such initiatives or cells, it is therefore important to repeatedly ascertain what specific scope for action there is in certain economic cycles, where potential resistance may arise and to what extent support is required within the organisation or from outside. Experience and wisdom, trust and credibility but also courage are important for successful strategies. In the medium term, it is also about a different, namely professional and politically radical socialisation of tomorrow's activists in the various organisations.

To sum up, the numerous initiatives and movements leading these struggles are undoubtedly facing a harsh headwind. But they keep alive the memory of the feasibility of a different way of producing and living, which becomes a necessity for many in times of existential crisis. In this respect, they show the possibility of an emancipatory alternative – beyond the limits of capitalism – for which it is worth fighting.

Note

1 This chapter draws, to a certain extent, on other works of the co-authors, namely Brand and Wissen (2017, 2021, pp. 183–207, 2026 (forthcoming, Chapters 5 and 7).

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28

PREFIGURATIVE DEGROWTH POLITICS

Decolonisation and the non-aligned movement

Paul Stubbs

Introduction

This chapter seeks to bring together two important movements: the broad assemblage that can be termed the degrowth movement that is the main focus of this handbook, and the mobilisation of the Global South in the decolonial and postcolonial era, through the role of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in general and, specifically, demands in the 1970s, for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). In recent years, scholarship on degrowth has focused more directly on global inequalities and the importance of reparation for historically unequal ecological exchange. At the same time, the treatment of these themes within the degrowth canon has not always adhered to a coherent conjunctural geopolitical frame and, if earlier forms of South–South solidarity are referenced at all, these tend to be dismissed as promoting 'growth at any cost' catch-up models. Here, I suggest that some of the geopolitical concerns of the NAM and the NIEO have, at the very least, parallels with and, more positively perhaps, real lessons for, degrowth. A renewed commitment to multilateralism, non-alignment and a new global economic and social order connects with aspects of a degrowth agenda inspired by decolonisation and sceptical of any prospects for degrowth within a capitalocentric frame.

NAM, with formal beginnings at a summit in the Yugoslav capital Belgrade from 1–5 September 1961, provides an insight into what can be termed 'globalisation otherwise', bringing other possibilities and worlds into view than today's neoliberal globalisation. NAM can be regarded as one of a number of what Adom Getachew (2019) terms critical antisystemic and anticolonial worldmaking projects after World War II. It offered a form of transnational solidarity with a vision of an emancipatory, modernising and decolonising globalisation whose dominant actors, with the exception of socialist Yugoslavia, were situated outside the European space, in what today is termed the Global South. NAM offered alternatives not only to East–West conflicts in the context of the Cold War but also expressed the hopes of a world emerging from colonial domination of the South by the North.

Although it still exists today, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NAM has lost much of the influence it had on international relations up until that point, although a number of commentators suggest that its principles and positions remain as relevant today as they ever were. In its early incarnation, NAM was largely silent on questions of the environment and, indeed, in

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both the run-up to and the aftermath of the 1972 United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, Sweden, it expressed a certain scepticism about concern for the environment emanating from the rich North. Instead, NAM insisted on a more holistic understanding linking environmental justice with questions of development and underdevelopment. Later, NAM stressed the importance of understanding questions of sustainable development from the perspective of the countries of the Global South and the importance of historical and contemporary inequality. Although stopping short of articulating an explicit degrowth politics, an account of NAM's shifting understandings of the politics of ecology brings questions of decolonial politics and practice sharply into focus and raises issues that remain relevant regarding modernity, development and global governance and order in today's multipolar multi-crisis world.

The chapter falls into three parts. The first part looks at the origins of NAM and its development in the 1960s and 1970s, not least the role it played in relation to the articulation of a NIEO and the shift in focus that this represented from questions of security and disarmament to questions of economic justice. The second part looks at the global articulation of environmental concerns in the same period and the connection, or more often lack thereof, with the concerns of NAM, the NIEO, and the Global South more generally. The third part addresses linkages that NAM subsequently made between decolonisation and sustainable development and the limits and possibilities of the articulation of a variegated non-aligned degrowth perspective today.

The non-aligned movement and the new international economic order

The pre-history of NAM can be reduced, albeit crudely, to two events. The first, chronologically, is what in the political memory of socialist Yugoslavia became known as 'the historical no', namely the break with Stalin's Soviet Union in 1948 and the pursuit of an independent socialist path. The second is the meeting, in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955 of 29 states from Africa and Asia keen to establish a new unity based on sovereign equality of states. Seven decades later the term 'Bandung spirit' still connotes the fight against colonialism, racism and dependency in global affairs even though the actual Bandung conference was riven by 'fault lines and divisions' (Shilliam 2019, p. 163). A follow-up conference never happened, not least because of a long-running border dispute between two important Bandung states, India and China. Into the vacuum stepped Yugoslavia whose radical defence of 'self-determination' in the dispute with Stalin and, indeed, the country's anti-fascist credentials from World War II, resonated with decolonised states. In desperate need of both new allies and new markets, the 1950s saw the Yugoslavs increasingly forging alliances, based on 'mutual respect', with 'the countries of the Third World . . . in the process of emerging from the grip of colonialism' (Pirjevec 2018, p. 266).

Yugoslav President Tito's tour of Asian and African states between December 1954 and February 1955, the meeting on the Yugoslav island of Brijuni in July 1956 between Tito, Egyptian President Nasser and Indian Prime Minister Nehru and, above all, the meeting on 29 September 1960 in the Yugoslav mission in New York during the XV United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), when the three were joined by Kwame Nkrumah, President of Ghana and President Sukarno of Indonesia, all contributed to the idea of a summit of countries describing themselves as 'neutral', 'non-engaged' or 'nonbloc', united in seeking to defuse growing Cold War tensions (Stubbs 2023, p. 9). The Belgrade summit was attended by heads of state or government from 25 countries, as well as three observers, fewer than hoped for, not least as the United States (US) put pressure on many Latin American countries to boycott the meeting because of the presence of Cuba.

A central organising concept for the NAM, first articulated by Nehru, was that of 'peaceful co-existence', a positive stance on international relations going beyond passive neutrality which, as in Stubbs (2023, p. 13), envisioned:

> [A] new era of equality in international relations based on sovereignty, independence, self-determination, territorial integrity, the absence of any affiliation with military-political groupings, the avoidance of the threat or use of force, noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries, general and complete disarmament, and peaceful resolution of disputes on the basis of the UN Charter.

There was, also, a strong focus on the struggle against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism as well as a challenge to unequal economic development, the importance of international technical co-operation and the need for a reformed and more representative UN. The climate crisis is, of course, missing from the list, along with migration, gender equality and some other themes. This is unsurprising, given there was little discussion of the environment in the early 1960s outside of rather specialised circles or in terms of single-issue concerns. Although there was a follow-up NAM summit in Cairo in October 1964, with some 47 participating countries and 10 observers, NAM experienced something of a hiatus in the mid-1960s with no further summit meetings until Lusaka (Zambia) hosted the third summit in September 1970, with 53 participating countries and 13 observers. This led to the institutionalisation of the NAM and regular summits every three or so years, with meetings of foreign ministers in between.

The New International Economic Order

In Lusaka, in the context of a reduction in Cold War tensions, NAM focused much more on economic questions, not least as Tito was joined by a new generation of leaders, including Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Indira Gandhi of India. NAM joined the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the group of developing countries known as the G77, both formed in 1964 with strong support from NAM, in calling for a NIEO. The Lusaka Declaration on Non-Alignment and Economic Progress referred to 'the poverty of developing nations' and their 'economic dependency' as a 'structural weakness of the world economic order', with the colonial past leading to a 'neo-colonialism that poses insurmountable difficulties in breaking the shackles of economic dependency', and called on the UN to bring about 'a rapid transformation of the world economic system, particularly in the fields of trade, finance and technology, so that economic domination yields to economic co-operation' (Tadić and Drobnjak 1989, p. 47). Three years later, the NAM summit in Algiers (5–9 September 1973) included an economic declaration that referred to imperialism as a form of 'open aggression against the economies of peoples who do not submit to foreign domination' (Tadić and Drobnjak 1989, p. 86) and contained an outline plan of action. In the context of the actions of the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC) – raising prices and limiting the supply of oil in response to US support for Israel in the war in the Middle East – the Algerians, in their capacity as Chair of the NAM, ensured that a planned UN discussion on the oil crisis be widened to include commodity prices, terms of trade and North–South economic relations more generally.

The UNGA Special Session, on 1 May 1974, adopted the NIEO as a Declaration and Programme of Action focused on five core thematic clusters: sovereignty, trade, modernisation, international decision-making and development assistance (Nymoen 2017, p. 19). It was followed by

the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States (CERDS) adopted at the regular 29th session of the UNGA on 12 December 1974 by 115 votes to 6 against, with 10 abstentions (UN Office of Legal Affairs 2023). Those voting against or abstaining, exclusively states from the Global North, were concerned with Article 2 of Chapter II of CERDS (UNGA 1974), reinforcing the right of national sovereignty over a nation's 'wealth, natural resources, and economic activities', stating that each state has the right:

> [T]o nationalize, expropriate or transfer ownership of foreign property, in which case appropriate compensation should be paid by the State adopting such measures, taking into account its relevant laws and regulations and all circumstances that the State considers pertinent.

In the context of the oil crisis, countries in the Global North and West were reluctant to directly oppose the NIEO and CERDS and some, termed the 'like-minded states' – including Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands and Ireland – even offered support for the principles of the NIEO, at least initially (Dolman 1979; Marklund 2020; O'Sullivan 2015), with Sweden, in particular, linking issues of global inequality with questions of planetary boundaries. With non-oil producing NAM and G77 states empowered by OPEC's actions, willing to trade short-term hardship for longer-term gains, and hoping that the supply and price of other commodities could also be managed in their interests as oil had been, the NIEO and CERDS dominated global economic governance for a few years, at least discursively.

The backlash

The counter-offensive against the NIEO, led by the US, sought to unite the West and divide the Global South, treating NIEO demands as themes to be discussed one-by-one and often interminably, with calls for legal constraints on, for example, the actions of multi-national corporations watered down to consensual codes of conduct. Crucially the US and her allies succeeded in strengthening the role and power of the international financial institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, in which the rich countries held controlling majorities, at the expense of the UN and its agencies. The lessons of OPEC actions for the Global North were a combination of seeking to diversify away from a dependence on oil and of bringing OPEC states into the global capitalist club. The rolling out of neoliberal policies by Reagan, Thatcher and others, including harsh structural adjustment in response to the debt crisis among developing countries in the early 1980s, meant that the 'real new international economic order' (Mazower 2012) was one of free markets and growing inequalities not the more developmentalist and statist conceptions of the NIEO.

Gilman (2015, pp. 10–1) has argued that 'the failure of the NIEO was the result of a deliberate and concerted strategy on the part of leaders in the north, compounded by strategic choices on the part of the south', slowly dissolving in 'the cauldron of contingencies'. Although there was a sense that energy interdependence could be a part of a 'collective self-reliance' of states in the periphery, a type of delinking from the capitalist world system, splits between oil-exporting and oil-importing states tended to grow wider over time. As Getachew has suggested, the NIEO formed the apex of anticolonial worldmaking and represented what now looks like a last-gasp attempt to channel the UN as the means for the creation of 'an egalitarian global economy' (Getachew 2019, p. 100), combining a Marxist 'diagnosis of economic dependence' with prescriptions 'articulated within the terms of a liberal political economy' (Getachew 2019, p. 145).

The logics and limits of modernisation

For our purposes here, it is important to consider both NAM and the NIEO as firmly rooted in a discourse and practice of 'modernisation' with a broadly shared template for development consisting of rapid industrialisation, concomitant urbanisation, and the modernisation of large-scale agriculture. Although this was, on the whole, a modernisation template that challenged all forms of neo-colonial economic domination by richer states and by multi-national corporations alike, it sought sovereign control over resources largely in terms of transferring ownership of the means of exploitation from foreign to national elites rather than questioning the need for exploitation *per se*. In many senses, then, it remained based upon an extractivist logic whilst, to an extent, seeking a nationalisation of 'structures and relations of removal, destruction and dehumanization' (Murrey and Mollett 2023, p. 769). Growth was to be driven by using natural resources to build up industrial capacity and increase exports of finished products. This was the age of the 'mega-project', with abstract ideas of 'nature' never allowed to stand in the way of 'progress' as human and non-human life was disrupted, conquered and transformed. For example, in Nkrumah's Ghana, huge dams were built on the Volta river to produce electricity for a massive increase in the smelting of aluminium (Rooney 2007, chapter 12). Such mega-projects were only the most extreme example of the material and affective linkage between the taming of nature and the achievement of sovereignty and growth. Growth was meant to lead to investments in health, education and welfare as a means of solidifying decolonial state-building, so it was a means to an end not an end in itself.

NAM and the NIEO were also committed to a nation-state logic, manifested in the marginalisation of non-state actors and indigenous movements from any discussions. In addition, the articulation of 'self-determination' meant that social and political developments in any NAM or G77 Member state were seen as 'internal' matters. Hence, policies or practices that produced increased inequalities or oppressed minorities would never be criticised openly in international meetings by other members of the Global South, even as the US and her allies sought to link development assistance to a liberal paradigm of 'human rights' (Özsu 2018). At the same time, NAM modelled a prefigurative form of transnational networking insofar as it created conditions for a kind of 'non-alignment from below' – transnational networks of co-operation in art, music, architecture, education and science, as well as technical co-operation, that went far beyond relations with near neighbours to enrich and enhance international decolonial solidarity on a global scale. However, this rarely extended to questions of environmentalism, much less to indigenous peoples' movements, even as such topics and movements gained wider international salience.

Although the NIEO was primarily focused on an architecture of global governance and trade, arguably it went hand-in-hand with ideas of planning linking the local, the national and the regional, and with ideas of popular participation (Stubbs 2023). As Aleksander Matković (2025 forthcoming) has argued, socialist Yugoslavia's system of self-management, influential in many non-aligned countries, had the potential, later actualised, to incorporate ecological questions, at least to an extent. Hence, a crude dismissal of both NAM and the NIEO as pro-growth at all costs is in danger of neglecting the spaces that were created for alternative understandings. In addition, NAM and the NIEO understood the global capitalist order (even if such a term was not used) as the product of centuries of colonial plunder compounded by neo-colonial exploitation of resources by powerful states and multi-national corporations such that, at times more implicitly than explicitly, there was a shared set of alternative imaginaries with some of the foundational texts of degrowth (Liegey 2021). In a sense, the conjuncture represents something of a missed opportunity in terms of the lack of direct connection between a nascent degrowth movement critical of developmentalism and extractivist industrialisation and a transnational movement of the

Global South emphasising self-determination and control over resources, even though the threads of such a connection were present.

Founex, Stockholm and beyond: environmentalism and development

In broad terms, increasing attention to environmental questions on the global stage in the late 1960s and early 1970s appears to exist in a parallel space to that of NAM and the NIEO. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) held in Stockholm (Sweden) during 5–16 June 1972, reflected growing scientific, popular and political concern in the industrialised capitalist West regarding problems of the environment. The Stockholm Conference, boycotted by many socialist states over the refusal to allow the German Democratic Republic to participate, became something of a litmus test for North–South relations. Swedish scientists and diplomats were instrumental in setting the original terms for the conference through interventions in the UN in 1967 and 1968 placing a strong emphasis on the problems of acid rain and pollution, considering these as transnational problems driven by 'technology, urbanization, and industrialization' linked to 'explosive population growth' (Paglia 2021, pp. 4–5).

Relatively early in the process, Swedish diplomats realised that developing countries were sceptical about the initiative, fearing that such a conference 'might undermine the international development agenda' (Paglia 2021, p. 4) and, indeed, Brazil, in particular, initially lobbied for a boycott (Mickelson 2015, p. 111; Paglia 2021, p. 7). Launching a diplomatic and scientific charm offensive, the Swedes sought to encourage buy-in from the Global South largely through arguing for the importance of 'learning from and avoiding the mistakes of the industrialized world' (Paglia 2021, p. 5), although this could still be interpreted as preventing developing countries 'from exploiting their natural resources and deny(ing) them the prosperity the North had already secured for itself at the expense of the environment' (Paglia 2021, p. 7). As Gosović (1992) helpfully reminds us, the Stockholm process raised the environment to an issue of global concern before it had become a question of domestic concern in most of the Global South and, in any case, developing country governments were unwilling, even if they had the capacity, to establish single-issue ministries or environmental agencies even as the Swedes insisted on 'state of the environment' reports ahead of the conference.

The meeting in Founex

The Canadian Maurice Strong, appointed as secretary-general responsible for preparing and running the Stockholm conference, whose background was in the oil business, sought pragmatically to bring issues of the environment and development together, and make the conference more appealing to the countries of the Global South. A large part of this was the organisation of a meeting (4–12 June 1971) in Founex (Switzerland) of 27 development economists, the majority from the South. The Founex seminar and report have been analysed as an exemplar of the impact small epistemic expert communities, including those from the Global South, can have on the framing of global issues (Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala 2020). Manulak's (2019) discussion of the event and the report remains one of the few detailed analyses that exist. At a time when developing countries consumed only about one-tenth of the earth's natural resources, Strong organised the Founex event to counter a growing concern that the conference was part of 'a neo-colonial plot to retard necessary economic development' (Manulak 2019, p. 106).

There were competing theories aired in Founex, including biologist Paul Ehrlich's controversial idea, expressed in his best-selling book *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich 1968), that the

over-developed world would need to reduce consumption considerably and, at the same time, the developing countries would have to settle for a kind of 'semi-development', an idea prefiguring some of the cruder degrowth arguments of today but 'never considered as a viable policy alternative' at the time (Manulak 2019, p. 105). Ehrlich, a product of US liberal thinking in many ways, saw the only way out of the population and food crisis in terms of draconian measures up to and including compulsory sterilisation and, crucially, suggesting US food aid should only go to 'those nations not beyond hope' (Robertson 2012, p. 149). As Robertson goes on to suggest, this would mean 'those who live in the West should be spared and those who live elsewhere "cut out"' (Robertson 2012, p. 149).

Ultimately, a group around the Pakistani Mahbub ul Haq, at the time working for the World Bank, described Ehrlich's ideas as an 'intellectual fantasy' conjuring up 'Malthusian ghosts' (ul Haq quoted in Manulak, p. 110). Ul Haq's ideas came to frame the conference report, written with the Sri Lankan Gamani Corea, later Secretary General of UNCTAD. Ul Haq articulated a position that Strong (quoted in Mickelson 2015, p. 112) described as 'devastating and simple':

> [I]ndustrialization had given developed countries disproportionate benefits and huge reservoirs of wealth and at the same time had caused the very environmental problems we were now asking developing countries to join in resolving. The cost of cleaning up the mess, therefore, should be borne by the countries that had caused it in the first place. If they wanted developing countries to go along, they'd have to provide the financial resources to enable them to do so.

In broad brush stroke terms, the 1971 Founex report (UNEP 1981, p. 24) suggested that the South faced different kinds of environmental problems from the North with development, albeit recast so as not to focus exclusively on GDP growth, seen as the cure rather than the problem (UNEP 1981, p. 4):

> Development required a combination of state planning and sovereign state choices of priorities, on the one hand, and an injection of significant additional resources from the North, on the other. Instead of pollution, the developmental economists wanted the focus to be on resolving challenges of "poor water, housing, sanitation and nutrition."

Of course, poverty reduction was a challenge, too. There were clear links between the Founex report and the Stockholm Declaration and Action Plan, not least in relation to developing country exemptions from international environmental standards and additional development aid to cover the costs of integrating environmental concerns into social planning. At the same time, Haas et al. (1992, p. 32) argue that the Stockholm conference still 'focused largely on industrial pollution of air and water' and so 'paid more attention to the concerns of the developed countries' than the developing countries, and paid 'only lip service . . . to the notion that economic development was the solution to environmental degradation in the Third World' Hence, Stockholm in many ways maintained, rather than eroded, the disconnect between questions of the environment and broader Southern demands around equity and development.

The Stockholm impasse

Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and an important figure in the rejuvenation of NAM, was the only head of state – apart from Olaf Palme of host country Sweden – to attend the Stockholm

conference. Her speech to the plenary session of the UNCHE on 14 June 1972 remains relevant to questions of Southern understandings of environmental governance even today. The most quoted section is this, as it appears in DTE Staff (2022):

> Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters? For instance, unless we are in a position to provide employment and purchasing power for the daily necessities of the tribal people and those who live in or around our jungles, we cannot prevent them from combing the forest for food and livelihood; from poaching and from despoiling the vegetation. When they themselves feel deprived, how can we urge the preservation of animals? How can we speak to those who live in villages and in slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source? The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty.

Indira Gandhi was, therefore, 'guarded . . . but willing to enter into dialogue' (Mickelson 2015, p. 117). She positioned India, and by extension NAM, less as 'an unwilling participant in global environmental policy-making' (Mickelson 2015, p. 118) than as placing greater importance on issues of global economic reform and a distrust of the extension of neo-colonial international law to yet another domain (Bedjaoui 1979). This position was underpinned by an awareness of 'the reality of disproportionate climate impacts on the Global South that were scientifically traced to the historical environmental exploitation by the Global North' (Rao 2022, p. 70). In short, the (over-)developed world had created environmental problems and the financial burden of resolving them should be placed on them, too. Instead of acting with humility in such circumstances, the 'advanced countries . . . (which) have reached their present affluence by their domination over other races and countries (and) the exploitation of their own natural resources' were, effectively, using the environment to 'assume the right to interfere in the affairs of others' (Gandhi [1972] as cited in DTE Staff 2022).

The first direct reference by NAM to the Stockholm Conference came less than two months later – at the meeting (8–12 August 1972) of NAM Foreign Ministers in Georgetown (Guyana) – following a similar logic to Indira Gandhi but adding NAM's long-standing concern with imperialist wars and violence. Thus, as reported in Tadić and Drobnjak (1989, p. 69):

> The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment served to show the difference in the environmental problems experienced by the rich and the poor countries. The former were irresponsibly created by the industrialized nations which today try to unload the burden on the international community as a whole. On the other hand, while some of the environmental problems of the Third World are inherent to their under-development, others are a legacy of the practices of imperialism in its manifestations of colonialism and neo-colonialism and, more recently, have been caused by the war waged by imperialism in Indochina, the Middle East and Africa, where chemical and other arms are used for the purpose of destroying the ecology of the territories it hopes to occupy and, in some cases such as that of the Palestinian people, whose populations are displaced from their original homes.

Post-Stockholm

The power of the G77, in part reflected in the debates around UNCTAD and emerging discussions on the NIEO, led to the decision to situate the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi (Kenya), an important victory after attempts to locate UNCTAD and the UN Industrial

Development Organisation in the Global South had failed. This reflected a growing concern that the Stockholm conference had been dominated by the concerns of the industrialised countries and their NGOs. However, as Gosović (1992) points out, this was something of a pyrrhic victory for the Global South because UNEP, envisaged as a catalytic and coordinating body within the UN system, experienced staffing problems and, more importantly, only the developed countries could afford to attach permanent missions to it – meaning that the lobbying power of the G77 became extremely limited.

Another pyrrhic victory was in relation to post-Stockholm negotiations on priorities for the newly established Environmental Fund. The affluent North, joined by most of the Soviet bloc countries who had boycotted Stockholm, prioritised monitoring and information, pollution control, the atmosphere, energy, waste and recycling, and the drawing up of global standards and conventions. The developing countries, however, working closely together and accused of breaking 'the spirit of Stockholm', stressed, instead, the importance of funding projects to fight drought, desertification, the use of pesticides, soil erosion, water-borne diseases, the location of industries, adaptability of human settlements, and linkages between the environment and economics and trade. The South argued that universal standards, based on the myth of a level playing field as if the past could be set aside, had to wait for the elimination of inequalities in terms of trade, with a clear preference for technical assistance and training and lesson learning. This meant that Northern countries, already sceptical of writing blank checks for autonomous UN funds, insisted on more control over where and how money was spent and, in the context of the decline of the UN and the greater power of the IFIs, the Environment Fund was further marginalised.

To cut a long story short, as reported in Tadić and Drobnjak (1989, p. 93), the plea expressed by the NAM countries in May 1973 in the Kabul communique from the preparatory meeting before the Algiers summit soon proved hollow:

> The additional expenditures involved in programmes relating to the environment should not be allowed to prevent the satisfaction of the basic needs of the developing countries. Any assistance given to developing countries by the advanced countries in the domain of the environment should be additional to that assistance which is already being given as development aid, and the concern displayed by advanced countries for protecting the environment should not adversely affect the inflow of assistance for development or the trade of developing countries.

Whenever the Global South found a strong voice, whether through the G77 (together with China) or through NAM, it was questions of 'resource-based power, the need for third world self reliance, and the failure of market mechanisms' (Vogler 2007, p. 434) that took centre stage. A symposium jointly organised by UNCTAD and UNEP on Patterns of Resource Use, Environment, and Development Strategies in Cocoyoc (Mexico), 8–12 October 1974, had nothing of the paradigm-shifting quality of the Founex event (UNEP 1974). Instead, it took its lead very much from the NIEO and CERDS in terms of the need for 'changing the industrial geography of the world' (Cocoyoc Declaration, quoted in UNEP 1981, p. 118). Ongoing discussions of the Law of the Sea considered questions of the sea-bed and ocean 'beyond the limits of national jurisdiction' (CERDS Article 29) as issues of the 'common heritage of mankind' – in ways not simply about a shift in which countries have the right to exploit them but also engaging with what the Cocoyoc Declaration termed the '"outer limits" of the planet's physical resources' (UNEP 1981, p. 119) – thus showing that, on occasions, explicit connections between global economic governance and the environment were made by the Global South.

In relation to the environment, then, the position of the NAM countries throughout the 1970s and, indeed, beyond, is marked by a deep scepticism of both the motives and consequences of the priorities of the Global North. A 1972 Yugoslav memo ahead of the Georgetown NAM Foreign Ministers' Conference saw 'control of the environment' as 'still a relatively new thing' and 'not of primary importance for developing countries' (Archives of Yugoslavia 1972). Astonishingly, in his speech to the 11th NAM summit in Cartagena (Colombia) on 18 October 1995, in his capacity as outgoing Chair of NAM, Indonesia's President Suharto – a veteran of NAM meetings since 1970 – described the environment as one of a number of 'new issues put forward by the advanced countries' such that 'long-standing important issues of the developing countries are pushed aside' and, indeed, conditionalities in terms of environmental protection are imposed in relation to development assistance and debt resettlement programmes (Suharto 1995, p. 4). Issues concerning the Law of the Sea were, at the same time, always of major concern to NAM, as noted earlier, so that, at times, the position of NAM moved away from mere scepticism. However, even here one can trace a deep ambivalence between 'conservation of living resources of the high seas' (Tadić and Drobnjak 1989, p. 56 – re. original document 1970); rejection of 'exploitation of seabed resources outside of national jurisdictions' (Tadić and Drobnjak 1989, p. 127 – re. original document 1975); including deep-sea mining with 'inalienable sovereign rights' of developing countries to exploit their own seabed; and, indeed, for 'the legitimate rights . . . of land-locked developing countries' (Tadić and Drobnjak 1989, p. 245 – re. original document 1978) to easily access exploitation of those resources. As we shall see, in more recent years, ambivalences and contradictions in the context of the concept of 'sustainable development' come to the forefront of attention.

Macekura (2015, p. 132) suggests that after Stockholm a small number of large, Northern-led, transnational NGOs 'became leading forces actively working to mediate the growing North–South rift on environmental issues by enmeshing together local, national, and transnational groups'. He points to the promulgation and translation of ideas from *Small Is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973) in terms of intermediate or appropriate technology, not least as taken up by Barbara Ward and the Institute for Environment and Development in a model of industrialisation for the developing world that would be more decentralised and labour-intensive (Macekura 2015, p. 147). In his chapter 'Development', Schumacher addresses the problem of the 'dual economy'. In most developing countries, a small industrial sector exists alongside a large rural sector, often subsistence-based, leading Schumacher (1973, p. 114) to question 'the implicit assumption that the modern sector can be expanded quickly to absorb virtually the entire population'. He argued, instead, for job creation in villages and small towns using relatively simple production techniques and local materials for local use (Schumacher 1973, pp. 121–2). Schumacher's vision can be seen as influencing ideas of 'degrowth' explicitly detached from Eurocentric and neo-colonial understandings.

Sustainable development and the degrowth disconnect

Following the Brundtland Report published in 1987 and, even more clearly, the Rio Conference or Earth Summit of 1992, the concept 'sustainable development' became the privileged term linking social, environmental and economic issues together. In this sense, it has been embraced by national political elites in the Global South and by NAM and the G77 as the basis for a new 'global partnership' (NAM 1992). Indeed, the use of the concept appears as 'a direct consequence of Southern unease with giving a primacy to "environmental politics"' (Najam 2005, p. 117). As 'a construct designed to facilitate a bargain across the deep structural divide between North and South' (Vogler 2007, p. 430), it simultaneously reflects and challenges the dominant hegemonic order. NAM summits after the Rio Conference expressed concern not with the concept as such but with its failure

to deliver, not least in terms of additional financial resources and the transfer of environmentally sound technologies. At times, these same NAM summit declarations appear to equate economic development with economic growth *per se*, leaving little or no space for discussion of ideas around degrowth. Even when 'development' is seen as a more holistic concept, connections with critiques of modernity based on economism and extractivism resemble a step too far (Escobar 2015). Nevertheless, some potential areas of common ground can be detected and these are discussed, albeit briefly, in this section.

A concept that appears equally as important for NAM as that of sustainable development is the idea of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', first articulated on the world stage at the Rio Conference, and enshrined in international environmental law in Article 3(1) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change from 1992. The changing meaning of this concept – as it moved from principle to law and to practice – has remained highly contentious, with disagreement over the extent to which historical asymmetries in environmental impacts are properly accounted for, and how they can be converted into reparations of various kinds. The dangers of continued 'environmental colonialism' (Agarwal and Narain 1991), in which questions of climate crisis are delinked from long-term North–South inequality remains, of course. Indeed, the very idea of a homogeneous 'Global South' has become more and more difficult to sustain, in the context of the increasing importance of India and China, the growing number of industrialised middle-income countries, the growing gap between these and the poorest, as well as the specific concerns of small island and landlocked states. Throughout NAM's deliberations on these themes, a constant thread is the gap between actions that are made in good faith by NAM member states, and the failure of the rich countries to meet even a fraction of their commitments.

Scaling sustainability

Questions of scale remain important as a key element of the (dis)connect between degrowth and non-alignment. As Selcer (2018) reminds us, the history of environmentalism is about scale-making and the difficulties of connecting the global and the local, even as the categories themselves become unstable. NAM's continued focus on questions of global governance could, potentially, be a useful complement to the degrowth movement's tendency to focus on much smaller scales. Conversely, NAM's emphasis on nation-state sovereignty needs to be supplemented by the role of social movements and indigenous peoples and their diverse struggles for economic, social and environmental justice in order to resonate with initiatives from below. NAM has made some important moves in this direction recently; notably, rather than focusing exclusively on large-scale high-yield agriculture as one of the development panaceas alongside rapid industrialisation, NAM has, instead, put more emphasis on small- and medium-scale farming and fishing (NAM 2016, para 631). Recent conferences have also returned to basic questions of food security and the effects of market subsidies in the over-developed world that echo discussions around the NIEO in the 1970s.

Other issues at the heart of the NIEO, in terms of core–periphery relations, the importance of 'collective self-reliance' and 'South–South co-operation', also remain highly relevant. These ideas demonstrate both the nature of unequal economic exchange – easily extendable in terms of unequal ecological exchange – and the possibilities offered by 'delinking', an idea associated with Samir Amin, which attempts to reduce Global South dependencies on the global capitalist system and prioritises people's needs over those of international capital (Grabner-Radkowitsch and Strunk 2023, p. 10). Here, perhaps, some of the actions of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa) who have been using their combined economic power to put forward alternative models of financialisation, particularly de-dolarisation, and to challenge

US-led political hegemony, become increasingly relevant. How BRICS, now expanded to include four more countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates) – with others slated to join soon – will relate to questions of sustainable development and respond to the climate crisis in the future is of immense importance, given their sheer size, income and profile in terms of energy and raw materials. The role of China, included as a key player in questions of global environmental governance even before formally becoming a member of the UN, is likely to be crucial, not least as it expands its investments across the Global South.

Much of what passes for degrowth, currently, risks being dismissed by NAM and other bodies in the Global South as merely another Eurocentric, even neo-colonial, discourse and disciplinary practice, limiting choices for countries in the periphery. As argued in relation to the so-called 'green economy', it is not impossible to imagine how degrowth could 'variegate, articulate and mutate as it encounters emerging modes of politics and governance' (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2017, p. 204) to form a heterogeneous assemblage of 'alternative sustainabilities'. Cavanagh and Benjaminsen (2017, p. 205) contend that under conditions of global capitalism currently, these alternative sustainabilities are as likely, if not more likely, to involve new, 'green', forms of land-grabbing and colonial or neo-colonial forms of 'accumulation by dispossession' justified in environmental terms as:

> land and ecosystems in the developing world are comparatively under-utilized and thus economically optimal for environmental change mitigation – as sinks, still, but this time for carbon and biodiversity rather than conventional forms of waste.

Discussions of degrowth postcapitalist alternatives and decolonisation in other chapters in this handbook present cases and visions of socially and ecologically just practices caring for people and planet in holistic ways, many conscious of the need to disrupt and overcome Global North–South paradoxes that characterise capitalism, and attempting to pursue decolonising ideals in prefigurative *hybrid* practices – see in this volume, Sitrin (Chapter 4); Tsagkari et al. (Chapter 10); Barkin (Chapter 12); Vetter and Fersterer (Chapter 14); Brand and Wissen (Chapter 27); Paulson et al. (Chapter 29); Robra et al. (Chapter 32) and De Wever and Hartog (Chapter 34).

Another NIEO is possible

Arturo Escobar, a leading decolonial thinker and activist heavily involved in the World Social Forum, has pointed to the similarities between post-development discourses originating in the Global South, Latin American *Buen Vivir* ('the good life' or collective well-being), and ideas of degrowth, not least in terms of challenging all versions of modernity based on extractivism, including the neo-extractivism of progressive regimes. The argument that 'growth and the economy should be subordinated to Buen Vivir and the rights of nature, not the other way round' (Escobar 2015, p. 6), however, represents a direct challenge to the continued anthropocentrism of NAM. Connecting struggles over climate and water justice and ecological debt, for example, does need transnational institutional support from organisations such as a transformed future NAM. In its heyday, NAM was open to counter-hegemonic thinking and, perhaps, a revitalised NAM, or a different assemblage of movements, could be part of what Escobar terms 'an entirely different logic of socio-natural life, indexed provisionally as non-liberal, non-capitalist, communal, and relational' (Escobar 2015, p. 10). If ideas of degrowth are to take root in the Global South, then they must 'connect with the identities and realities of the Global South' (Rodríguez-Labajos et al. 2019, p. 182). Indeed, in both its argumentation and mode of decision-making, the World Social

Forum, as an institutionalisation of the alter-globalisation movement, provided clear connections with those parts of the degrowth movement most attuned to decolonial thought and practice.

The need for a new non-alignment and, indeed, a new NIEO has been expressed in a number of initiatives, including Progressive International, which called for renewal of non-alignment 'in the face of increasing geopolitical tensions born from a decisive shift in the global balance of power' in an event in Havana (Cuba) in January 2023 to coincide with Cuba's chairing of the G77. It presented a vision of a new NIEO fit for contemporary purposes through adding key issues, including digital technology and environmental breakdown. This assertion of the power of the Global South in relation to 'international climate action and the protection of national sovereignty over the extraction of natural resources' (Progressive International 2023), at least on first reading, appears to resemble more of a 'progressive extractivism' than a degrowth manifesto, however. The new Program of Action (Progressive International 2024, p. 9) contains a number of insightful ideas on how to create 'ecologically equal exchange', including 'resource export clubs', and yet is more focused on achieving a balance between 'industrial advancement, human development, and ecological restoration' than a commitment to degrowth itself. At the same time, a new non-alignment and a new international economic, environmental and social order remain key elements of a potential way out of current crises and imminent collapse, and can only be strengthened by connections with decolonial understandings of degrowth.

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29

ECOFEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL FEMINIST DEGROWTH FUTURES

Susan Paulson, Anna Saave and Sourayan Mookerjea

Positive degrowth futures require attention to gender systems that organise and give meaning to the production and reproduction of socialised humans, relationships and environments in every society. This chapter draws on a range of feminist approaches with the purpose of illuminating, and nourishing, efforts to reorient human energies and societies around care and the regeneration of life. It recognises that, throughout history, knowledges and actions of regenerative care have been part of gendered resource management, institutional structures (kinship, economy, governance) and cultural politics that orient groups towards various purposes. And it illuminates diverse ways in which gender systems are currently being adapted and mobilised to support regenerative care for self, other humans, and other nature.

The transformative powers of gender provoke fierce resistance, including reactionary portrayals of currently dominant norms as determined by biology or by God(s), rendering we humans impotent to change. Gendered social expectations are internalised to produce desires and experiences that feel natural and right. This visceral embodiment makes it difficult for many of us to question gender practices as historical phenomena that can be changed. So, efforts to prefigure and produce degrowth futures, and to enhance meaning and pleasure along the way, need gender politics and practices that render explicit and move beyond forms like hierarchical binaries and compulsive heteronormativity that support growth-driven societies.

This chapter rallies selected ideas and opportunities to address challenges of degrowth world-making, without aiming to fully represent the wide-ranging realms of feminist literature. We co-authors previously collaborated, with others, on the article 'Why Are Feminist Perspectives, Analyses, and Actions Vital to Degrowth?' (FaDA Writing Collective 2023), which discusses dozens of publications that connect global feminisms with degrowth, thereby responding to widely expressed concerns about the under-representation of these perspectives in many scholarly characterisations of degrowth (Dengler and Seebacher 2019; Gregoratti and Raphael 2019; Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019). We observe that degrowth literature overall is limited by politics of knowledge and forms of disciplinary policing that preclude many feminist poetics, methodologies and styles of intervention.

Three sections of this chapter bring differing perspectives and studies into dialogue. The first, led by Anna Saave, presents possibilities for transitions from fossil-fuelled societal metabolisms operating through unequal ecological exchange to bio-based metabolisms onshored in the Global

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North – transitions that must encompass shifts away from the imperial way of life towards cultural forms centred around regenerative earth-care and commoning. The second section, led by Susan Paulson, draws inspiration from Indigenous and communitarian feminisms and caring masculinities in the Americas, asking how some collective struggles for dignity, territory, and intergenerational continuity contrast with and/or complement liberal feminist pursuits of individual rights and personal empowerment. The third section, led by Sourayan Mookerjea, presents political economic analyses of gendered historical processes that have supported expanding market production via structural subordination of social reproduction and the undermining of subsistence, together with feminist initiatives to reclaim and revalue subsistence as the core purpose of human organisation. We now introduce contested concepts important throughout, namely degrowth, ecofeminisms and decolonial feminisms.

Degrowth advocates seek to reduce global material throughput via democratic processes oriented to sustain equitable well-being and abundant life on earth (Barlow et al. 2022; Kallis et al. 2020). Degrowth researchers and practitioners apply a wide array of strategies towards shared objectives – to decrease quantities of material and energy transformed by humans (primarily through change in wealthy countries), to curb cultural and personal obsessions with growth, and to reorient societies around equitable well-being and regeneration of humans and other nature.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s via synergies among feminist and ecological analyses and commitments. Ecofeminist research has shown how gendered relationships with environments vary through time and across cultures. In some contexts, gender systems support care for and regeneration of ecosocial worlds, in others they facilitate exploitation and degradation of humans and other nature, and often both tendencies coexist in tension (Barca 2020; Mies and Shiva 2014 [1993]; Salleh 2009, 2017 [1997]). Ecofeminist initiatives have mobilised gender identities and experiences, especially among women, in solidarity action for environmental care and protection, and for political change.

Early ecofeminist work focused largely on ways in which two ideological binaries – humans over nature, and men over women – interact to exploit, oppress, and devalue women and nature (Carson 1962; Merchant 1980). This radical new perspective provoked a range of critiques, and contributed to emerging expressions of feminist political ecology, feminist environmentalism, communitarian and Indigenous feminisms, feminist ecosocialism, posthuman feminisms, gender and climate justice, among others. Working together, these approaches strengthen intersectional perspectives to show that, in practice, gender categories and relations never operate as simple binaries but always interact with colonial, ethnoracial, socioeconomic and/or other systems of differentiation.

Decolonial feminisms do not treat hierarchical binaries as natural or universal givens, but as historical products of modern Western society that have been disseminated through (neo)colonialism and globalisation. Decolonising efforts recognise and practice a wider array of gender orders constituent of world cultures. Sandy O'Sullivan (2021), for example, shows how North American Indigenous Peoples challenge the assimilation of their cultures into colonial binaries by restoring traditional gender and kin roles and relations.

Histories of growthism are being revised by critical attention to one mode that decolonial feminist María Lugones (2007) calls the colonial/modern gender system. Analysts focus on the historical establishment and operation of a key set of features: first, conceptual and institutional divorce of market-oriented activities identified as 'productive labour' from other activities identified as 'reproductive care'; second, designation of the first as 'masculine' and the second as 'feminine'; and, finally, allocation of disproportionate monetary value, resources and power to masculine-associated production. In the 20th century, this mode was pushed towards

heteronormative nuclear family households as units of residence, economic survival and reproduction. Institutionalised and disseminated in mutual interaction with globalising industrialisation, this model has reshaped and resignified previously existing gender roles and subjectivities to better serve the maximisation of profit and economic expansion.

Rather than delineate feminist approaches mentioned here as distinct paradigms or competing schools of thought, this chapter highlights the creative interaction of ideas, approaches, and positions. In general, these feminisms are united by consensus that today's growth societies are enabled by gender institutions that help to organise and justify the over-exploitation of humans and of natural environments. And they are divided by debates about root causes and mechanisms of these dynamics, and around strategies for change (Gaard 2011). In this chapter, we co-authors do not see gendered attitudes and behaviours towards nature as universal or biologically determined. Instead, we understand gender–environment dynamics as constantly shifting in interaction with historical and cultural processes, and we promote responses on multiple fronts, from intimate relationships to structural and technological adjustments, cultural and scientific practices, and international policies. Theories of intersectionality shape our understanding of gender as co-constituent and interacting with coloniality, racialisation, class, geography, ableness, and other systems of power and differentiation, although limitations of space prohibit due attention to all (The Combahee River Collective 1997). To support comprehensive approaches to gender–environment dynamics, and to increase relevance for diverse actors, this chapter also draws on ideas of hierarchical masculinities, ecological masculinities and gender systems (Connell 2014; Hultman and Pulé 2019; Pease 2021; Paulson 2015).

It is clear that degrowth futures require feminist contributions in order to move beyond colonial/modern gender systems at the heart of the growth-driven civilisational paradigm that establishes humans as separate from and superior over other nature, men over women, coloniser over colonised, white over non-white, production over reproduction, mind over body, and universal truth over local knowledge and experience (Collard and Dempsey 2018). Yet, tensions and disconnects surround considerations of feminisms in degrowth. Every degrowth advocate we have talked with insists that feminist perspectives and practices are vital to degrowth. In scholarly publications and university curricula, however, some degrowth studies exclude gender considerations altogether, some limit readings to ecofeminist work from the 1980s and 1890s, and surprisingly few engage with 21st-century feminisms. As a result, degrowth concepts and conversations sound quite different among those scholars and activists who have been participating since 2016 in the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), and have been actively thinking with and practising feminisms informed by decoloniality, intersectionality, indigeneity and cross-cultural diversity.

In the meantime, feminist epistemological, methodological and organisational approaches have been quietly shaping degrowth processes (Abazeri 2022; Barca 2020; Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019). Numerous degrowth-related doctoral projects have employed the kind of methodological approaches described by Jennifer Manning (2022, p. 39):

> A decolonial feminist ethnography is an empowering, ethically engaged methodology that can address the complexities of the lived world and the complications of power in research to bring forward different worldviews, knowledges and lived experiences.

And applications in scholarship are exemplified in the non-hierarchical co-production of the volume *Degrowth & Strategy* by eight diversely positioned editors (Barlow et al. 2022). We now turn to possibilities for applying feminist approaches to the formidable challenge of shifting from fossil-fuelled to bio-based social metabolisms.

Feminisms helping to craft more sustainable metabolisms

Feminist insights that strengthen degrowth theory and epistemology also need to inform policies and processes in very practical ways. This section explores feminist degrowth contributions to one major transformation project, superseding fossil capitalism and its destructive metabolism. As a specific mode of organising human economic activity, capitalism is a historical phenomenon connected with certain society–nature metabolisms (Pineault 2022, Chapter 2, this volume; Saave 2022). The currently dominant mode, fossil-fuelled industrial production with increasing digitalisation, is leading to degradation of conditions for human flourishing, and even survival. To overcome this disastrous metabolism, political economies, especially in the industrialised Global North, need to urgently shift their production and consumption from fossil to biological resource bases, including in agriculture and forestry, while limiting those operations with respect to ecosphere dynamics.

Uses and management of forests are gaining attention as a field of transition for the societal project of moving away from fossils. Forests are (still) abundant in many countries of the Global North, where they might supply local commodity chains, as well as world markets, and – if managed sustainably – can serve as renewable resources base for bio-based commodities.

Transitioning away from fossil capitalism and its colonial history and present requires reconsideration of related forms of consuming and behaving that Brand and Wissen (2021, Chapter 27, this volume) term the 'imperial mode of living', perpetuated by growth-oriented ideals and lifestyles. If transition strategies don't pay sufficient attention to this cultural mode, the necessary technical project of changing throughput via increased use of forest-based resources would still fail to transform capitalist societies. The imperial mode of living not only relies on fossil fuels but also depends on and perpetuates oppression and exploitation along the lines of colonies, gender, racialisation, class and other categories. If this mode of living and the inequities that sustain it are not tackled, unjust and unsustainable natural resource regimes originating from historic colonial production and consumption patterns will most likely persist.

To move beyond fossil-fuelled industrial production and the imperial mode of living, extractivist uses of resources from the Global South and global peripheries need to stop. Local populations impacted by ecological and social consequences of extractivism have long demanded different ways of relating to nature and organising the society–nature metabolism. A fundamental step in transition away from global extractivisms is for Global North societies to onshore their natural resource extraction, allowing other regions to manage their own resources and pursue their own paths. What is the place of feminist ideas and practices in this transformation? And how can we learn from and apply these approaches to make societal transformations complete beyond merely changing the resource base? Feminists work hard to be heard in debates about how to transform currently unsustainable structures and institutions, and their perspectives inform this transformation on at least three levels.

First, views on the process of onshoring natural resource extraction to Global North societies are critically sharpened by questions asked by feminists such as Wichterich (2015), Svampa (2021) and Ramcilovic-Suominen et al. (2022) and by social justice advocates like Backhouse et al. (2021) and Alook et al. (2023). Attention to gender differences is relevant for all the questions they raise. Who will benefit from the extraction of natural resources and associated production in the Global North? How can wealthy societies that expand bio-based production within their national borders stay within the limits of the biosphere? How can former resource extraction sites in the Global South be ecologically restored and transformed in ways that offer livelihoods, including jobs not based in exporting resources that provide living wages to all segments of a

population? Who gets to be included in the expected growth of jobs surrounding resource extraction in the Global North, and how will high- and low-paying positions be distributed? Whose livelihoods are affected adversely (or positively) through novel or increased bio-based production?

Second, feminists point to the importance of supporting epistemological justice when it comes to knowledge and visions about the use of natural resources. How can societies centre forms of bio-based production that incorporate local and historical knowledge about specific ecosystems, instead of perpetuating growth-oriented business paradigms that prevail in industrial forestry or agriculture (Hackfort and Saave 2024)? How can sustainable resource use be supported through changes in masculine- and feminine-associated skills and values developed and displayed through productivist employment and consumerist lifestyles (Brand et al. 2021)?

Third, feminists have called for commitment to minimise ecotoxicity (Carson 1962; Seager 2003), with special force from positions as parents, and as members of marginalised communities. Expansion of bio-based production can be less dirty than, for example, expansion of mining, drilling, fracking, and refining non-renewable resources, which involve toxic chemicals, among other hazards. However, increased bio-based production can also bring risks and threats to public health, notably when its expansion relies on pesticides, fertilisers, or GM crops and trees.

Transformative moves away from contemporary metabolisms must leave fossils in the ground while also fostering social justice. Should bio-based production expand, then restructuring of Global North landscapes is inevitable. What is at stake now is whether necessary restructuring will support sustainable multiple uses, including shared and non-commodified benefits, or whether it will be implemented according to priorities of financial capital investments, private property and market profitability. Feminist analyses argue strongly for sustainable multiple uses, developed via democratic, multi-stakeholder positions and planning.

Feminist scholarship provides conceptual guidance for responding to questions raised here. Ariel Salleh (2010, p. 211), for example, advocates prioritisation of meta-industrial forms of labour, a concept that highlights human activity that does not extract more than is returned but instead sustains balanced metabolisms by mediating human and natural cycles in labour practices and dynamics that are 'relational, cyclical, flow oriented, regenerative'.

Feminists also call for the expansion of commoning (Helfrich and Bollier 2014; Vetter and Fersterer, Chapter 14, this volume) as a principle and practice of shared governance, which includes public decision-making over systems of environmental resource use, and democratic and just distribution of resources and profits obtained. In contrast to private property and individual accumulation that have been central to expanding fossil-fuelled industrial/digital capitalism, commoning develops forms of doing and organising grounded in principles that have enabled human communities to thrive sustainably throughout much longer histories. But this is not enough.

A feminist-informed transformation also requires changing extractivist mindsets that justify Western societies' approach to resource extraction (Willow 2016). This includes leaving behind petro-masculinities (Daggett 2018) and other subjectivities whose legitimisation is grounded in fossil metabolism. Ecofeminists propose earth care as a starting point for relating to nature differently. Barca (2020) recommends that industrialised societies learn from people who practice earth care, such as Amazon forest dwellers whose livelihoods centre around the ecosystems they live in, and whose actions follow logics, rhythms and tasks that prove compatible with enhancing reproductivity, and that are incompatible with commercial extractivist uses of the forest. The following section provides glimpses of some of these lifeways. The task for growth-saturated societies is to take such approaches seriously in their own search for better and more sustainable livelihood strategies.

Learning from practices of earth care observed in diverse contexts could strengthen caring and regenerative perspectives already present in industrialised societies. A major challenge lies in the active devaluation of many forms of care by dominant norms and gendered subjectivities. During empirical research in southern Germany, for example, co-author Anna Saave observed some men foresters performing acts of nurturing, practicing precautions, or bringing joy to humans and other beings. One tangible example is in the practice of kindly offering and serving coffee to fellow foresters. Yet, these caring gestures of solidarity among working men seemed overshadowed by more aggressive group-defining practices, such as referring to a cleaning woman in demeaning terms, or making noise when a university-educated forestry manager was talking. Saave also observed foresters respond by mocking unfamiliar extensions of care. For example, the concern that one man forester expressed for the comfort of a woman participant was met with sexual innuendo. Any real transformation of society–nature metabolisms requires acceptance, practice and pride in caring masculinities (Elliott 2015), which can be supported via critical attention to hegemonic masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and their intersectional dynamics with class, racialisation and other differences.

Meta-industrial labour, commoning, earth caring, and shifting mindsets and subjectivities are interacting strategies to build ways of being, working and producing that are more equitable and more compatible with cycles of ecosystems and earth systems. They enable transformations on multiple levels, combining shifts in the resource base with transformed ways of relating to each other, to self, and to non-human nature.

Indigenous feminisms, communitarian feminisms and caring masculinities

Indigenous and communitarian feminists variously celebrate and politicise collaborative practices of commoning, conviviality and regeneration of life (Cabnal 2010; Moreano Venegas et al. 2021; Simpson 2021). Some activists explicitly contrast their collective struggles for intergenerational rights to culture and territory, and for participatory politics in the community and beyond, with struggles for individual rights and opportunities advanced among liberal feminists (MODII undated). By integrating women and men, young and old, in community-based healing and world-making, the practices and politics noted here converge with forms of degrowth praxis, resonating particularly strongly with a range of grassroots initiatives not always visible in scholarly discussions of degrowth (Richter 2022). This section encourages learning from some initiatives in the Americas and asks how these integrating and intersectional approaches may contribute to degrowth futures.

In an article titled after a popular slogan 'Feminismo comunitario: Que el cuidado de la vida sea responsabilidad de todas y todos' (Communitarian feminism: Make caring for life the responsibility of everyone – feminine and masculine), Natalia Menacho (2020) observes the emergence of movements across Latin America supporting the organisation of lifeways and economies around *buen vivir*, good living for all, and joins Adriana Guzmán (2020) and Julieta Paredes (2010, 2015) in locating the modus operandi of communitarian feminism in strengthening processes through which urban and rural communities protect, care for and live convivially with other humans and mother nature. Maya K´iché leader Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic (2022) describes how communitarian feminisms are woven into movements towards healing, territorial sovereignty and webs of life in Guatemala.

Longtime feminist convictions that interpersonal relations are political are mobilised by the organisation Feminismo Comunitario Antirracista Anticolonial (FCAA undated), which forms part of the Tejido de Cultura viva Comunitaria de Bolivia (Fabric of Living Community

Culture of Bolivia). This group makes it clear that community work revitalising gendered interdependence in cultural traditions is inseparable from gendered struggles for bodily and territorial dignity and liberation via decolonisation, depatriarchisation and decommodification. Maristella Svampa (2021) advances the concept '*feminismos ecoterritoriales*' (ecoterritorial feminisms) to explore the diverse struggles of Latin American women in environmental and anti-extractivist movements addressing issues including sacrifice zones, bodies and territories, and food sovereignty.

We R Native (undated), an English-language resource for Native youth, by Native youth, expresses the goal of Indigenous feminism as 'Creating a world where people of all genders are respected and valued', and encourages moves to help build this world by decolonising our minds, revitalising Indigenous traditions and upholding tribal sovereignty. Initiatives across Canada advance actions, interventions and modes of organising that encompass Indigenous, environmentalist and feminist approaches. Examples include Idle No More, mobilising 'a peaceful revolution – to honour Indigenous sovereignty and to protect the land and water and sky' (Idle No More undated); Unist'ot'en Camp (undated) working to heal the people, stop pipeline construction and heal the land; and the Indigenous Women's Healing Centre (IWHC undated) embracing traditional values and cultures to heal generational scars of colonialism and residential schools.

These interacting feminisms offer inclusive alternatives to decades of 'gender and development' initiatives aimed exclusively at providing certain opportunities for women, initiatives that have often triggered unintended chain reactions, and that have proven insufficient to transform colonial/modern gender systems. In societies where power and prestige became associated with money and employment, liberal feminist policies and programs designed to increase women's participation in paid work have empowered many individual women relative to other household and community members. Women's increased access to income and participation has contributed to some desired societal shifts. However, operating in dangerous liaison with neoliberal economic expansion, this path to women's liberation has also exacerbated the ecosocial challenges to which degrowth responds. In the past half century, hundreds of millions of women were moved into paid work in societies that did not sufficiently adjust social institutions to bolster and value the vital unpaid work that generations of women had been doing. Women were moved into economic production amid public cultures that did not support reorientation of masculine expectations, knowledges and employment conditions towards reproductive and care work. This formidable shift contributed to a massive surge in gross domestic products, resources used and pollution generated, together with multi-scale crises of care and ecosocial reproduction. Virulent campaigns unleashed around the world blame those social crises on women's deviations from traditional gender roles, fuelling reactions that range from limiting access to birth control to attacks on 'gender ideology' and on LGBTQ+ youth. These reactions make it politically tricky for degrowth analysts to critically discuss the contribution that massive commodification of women's labour has made to the great acceleration in global throughput of material and energy.

As Françoise Vergès (2019) lays bare in *Un féminisme decolonial* – translated as *A Decolonial Feminism* (Vergès 2021) – liberal feminism has long been co-opted by, and complicit with, capitalism, racism, colonialism and imperialism. The time is ripe for global degrowth feminisms to help forge gender systems that socialise and reward variously positioned actors to invest in the well-being, care and regeneration of communities and environments (The Care Collective 2020).

An unanticipated source of inspiration for this challenge is found among men who enact caring regenerative roles, even as they sometimes perform masculinities adapted for labour in extractive industries that degrade their bodies and environments. During decades of ethnographic research

in South America, co-author Susan Paulson and collaborators observed men practising intimate actions that nurture, protect, and regenerate humans and other beings (DeVore et al. 2020; Paulson et al. 2022). In Brazil's Atlantic Forest, former plantation labourers care lovingly for springs and trees that nourish animals in their agroforest plots. In the Peruvian Andes, men planting a field sing lovingly to the oxen who plough, to the seeds they sow and to the earth who nourishes them. In the Bolivian Andes, men collaboratively repairing irrigation canals chant gratitude to the water and to Pachamama, offering her coca and alcohol. In an indigenous Amazonian territory, men fishing for food swim with their children, telling tales about forest creatures.

Vital for any degrowth theory of change is the fact that these phenomena do not exist in isolation from dominant systems. The extractivist boom that quadrupled the quantity of material extracted from Latin America during the past four decades depended not only on cheap access to natural resources (Martinez-Alier and Walter 2016) but also to a boom of women wage workers, together with cheap access to millions of men manufactured as disposable human resources. Results of this surge of over-exploitation and unequal ecological exchange are evident not only in the parched and eroded Andean hillsides and forests razed for monocrop plantations or transformed by petroleum exploitation but also in the scarred and fatigued bodies of working men, and in men's falling life expectancies and educational achievements relative to women. The miracle is that, even among those positioned in subordinate masculinities in societies coloured by patriarchy and machismo, many men continue to sustain and create life-worlds through nurturing practices and relationships. Their acts of tenderness, connection and interspecies care that in some contexts are condemned as weak and unmanly, in others are respected and experienced as admirable manifestations of masculinity.

These examples respond to a dilemma raised by Bob Pease (Chapter 30, this volume) – acknowledgement that economic growth is coded as masculine and disproportionately serves the interests of elite white men has not been accompanied by sufficient fostering of degrowth subjectivities and practices that support men to embrace relational ethics of care for themselves, other humans and non-humans. Martin Hultman and Paul Pulé (2019) have advanced theoretical and practical strategies to support ecological masculinities that move away from gendered embodiments of the complex and persistent violences that drive today's ecosocial degradation. Yet, stubborn resistance continues to be stoked by masterful messages persuading all kinds of people that it is manly to desire, and to pursue, fossil-fuelled high-tech growth, and that its achievement will extend masculine privilege.

It should be no surprise that people who identify with privileged positions dig in to defend the status quo. And in current systems, some men do enjoy disproportionate benefits and suffer fewer risks and sacrifices than others. However, Paulson (2024, 2015) argues that, for the global majority of men, recent growth has been less of a joyride and more of a Faustian bargain in which money, prestige and power associated with the roles of breadwinner and nature-dominator come with heavy personal and ecosocial costs. She cites evidence showing that, across the Americas, and in global averages, boys and men lag significantly behind women in education and life expectancy, and suffer hugely disproportionate burdens of occupational deaths, murder, suicide, overdose, incarceration and military violence. While subordinate, non-normative, and Global South men bear compound burdens, even wealthy white men are disproportionately hurt through behaviours like excessively consuming red meat and alcohol, driving fast cars, and repressing vital emotions and relationships of caring and self-care. All are relevant for degrowth.

Ecofeminists have long shown how growth-driven gender–environment systems bring harm to women and to nature; resistance to change has been sustained by the denial of gendered sacrifices to growth borne by diversely positioned men. The myth that women's intrinsic closeness to nature

makes them universally responsible for reproductive labours has been debunked by historical research, revealing the brutal imposition of this scheme in modernising Europe (Federici 2004). The stubborn myth is also contradicted by empirical evidence from communities throughout history and around the world where admired masculinities are fulfilled by reproducing animal herds, agroforestry plants and human families; as well as by assuring the regeneration of ecosocial systems on which they depend.

By fostering nurturing desires and practices among diverse men, as well as other gender identities, and by forging community-wide responses and alternatives to gendered environmental violence, movements discussed here broaden motivations and horizons for all to contribute to ecofeminist degrowth futures.

Political economic systems: exploitation via oppression or subsistence through care?

Feminist theorisation of political economy, together with related strategies for systemic transformation, link local modes of production to historical and ongoing processes of imperialism, colonialism and state power. Here we focus on one characteristic feature of the current world-economy, the subordination of social reproduction to the dominant domain of commodity production. This subservience is manifest in the invisibility and devaluation of regenerative work within and among households, in the marginalisation of everyday life-sustaining subsistence practices, and in the devaluation of use-value created therein. The maintenance of human mental and physical health, for example, requires ubiquitous and constant care work, most of which is rendered invisible in current public policy and in dominant scientific disciplinary knowledges, especially when this work is carried out in household settings. This section draws on ecofeminist political economy to guide degrowth futures away from relatively recent historical distinctions that separate households from the economy and public life, and to support the development of integrated worlds centred around life-sustaining practices of social reproduction.

In *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici (2004) traces the emergence of ideological and institutional distinctions that separated households from economic and public life amid a historical transformation starting in Europe's late Middle Ages that wrenched the domain of economic production apart from the domain of social reproduction. Federici's radical revision of received narratives of the historical transition to capitalism features a deeply gendered account of changes in the social division of labour. This critical history of the subalternisation of social reproduction is vital for degrowth theorisation of contemporary racial-capitalist, colonising, patriarchal state and inter-state systems. Equally vital to degrowth futures is the understanding that colonial history is not merely a receding past but also still actively shaping the present, including through gendered social divisions of labour on every scale.

In *The Subsistence Perspective* – a translation of a 1977 work by Mies in German – Maria Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) complement the conceptualisation of proletarianisation as differential *subalternisation* in Federici (2004, 2021) through their identification of processes of *housewifisation-colonisation* at the heart of international divisions of labour. Privatised luxury consumption in manors and estates of the metropoles emerges historically with commodity production (of silver, gold, sugar, pepper, cinnamon, coffee, tea, linen, silk, indigo, porcelain and so on) through various forms of coerced labour and appropriated nature in the colonies. Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) show how these processes co-evolved within a colonial-patriarchal gender model institutionalised by church and state, and exported globally as part of interlocking systems of oppression.

This model has continued to evolve with changing dynamics of capitalist growth. During the 20th century, efforts to institutionalise a heteronormative nuclear household at the core of proletarian kinship, together with gendered hiring policies, advertising and other cultural shifts, yielded the idealised feminine role of the non-productive, consumer housewife. While the nuclear family with housewife found its greatest demographic expression in mid-century United States, the image was disseminated worldwide through media, advertising and international development. Then, in the neoliberal era, the new role of a 'working woman' was mobilised via coexisting promises of increased consumption and of women's liberation, contributing to a massive incorporation of women into paid labour around the world. While popular politics blame social crises on the shift from housewife to working woman, our degrowth analysis identifies the driving force of today's ecosocial crises in the strategic marginalisation and devaluation of regenerative labour and knowledge in both of these feminine roles, and in the exclusion of regenerative work from dominant masculine roles.

An evocative image of the current global economy as an iceberg in Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999, p. 31) demonstrates how small is the portion of work realised under formal employment with access to political labour rights consolidated during the Fordist-socialist era. Their image shows a tip above the water line that is visible in capitalocentric economics, and which depends on an enormous abode submerged below that water line, consisting of housewifed, informalised, precarious, undocumented forms of work beyond the reach of enforceable legal labour protection. Building on this critical insight, other ecofeminist political economists demonstrate how capitalist accumulation and economic growth has been made possible through global socio-ecological divisions of labour that subalternise variously positioned women, men, colonies and non-human nature, together with the subsistence and regenerative activities they realise.

Addressing the articulation of exploitation and super-exploitation through interlocking oppressions is central to degrowth futures. As are initiatives to reclaim the denigrated concept of subsistence, and to revalue it dialectically to stand for a political ecological order that sustains life directly without requiring either the accumulation of capital or growth. In the racist discourse of the colonisers, subsistence societies have long been derided as rude and primitive. However, as indigenous and peasant-led environmental justice movements continue to assert, subsistence can mean freedom, autonomy and preservation of economic/ecological/bodily bases. To affirmatively revalue the direct sustenance of life, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) call their response to world scale exploitation and accumulation a 'subsistence perspective'.

Radically original conceptions of freedom and labour inform compelling arguments that degrowth futures must be feminist futures. In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Mies (1986, p. 216) criticises Marx's claim that 'self-realisation, human happiness, freedom and autonomy – the realm of freedom – can be achieved only outside the sphere of necessity and of necessary labour, and by a reduction (or abolition) of the latter'. Unlike industrial mass commodity production, she argues, many kinds of care work, notably parenting and agroecological labour, are never totally alienated or dead, even when difficult, arduous or exploitative. Such insights hold for all kinds of care and cultural work, craft work, manufacturing and more, not only in households but also in community and public settings and on the margins of corporate growth sectors, whenever such work is oriented to the direct production of life, or of use-values. Mies (pp. 217–8) argues that a feminist concept of labour cannot be based on capitalist economics of time and resources, and must be oriented to 'a different concept of time' and a 'different interaction with nature'.

Feminist conceptions of time and labour enable us to grasp deeper connections within the growth imperative among world-scale racial-capitalism, the drive to decrease and devalue labour time invested in social reproduction, and the ruthless acceleration of the social metabolism. By

revaluing the labour, knowledge and time invested in regenerating life, ecofeminist approaches hold profound implications for degrowth proposals, including calls to decommodify the labour, goods and services on which the intergenerational reproduction of households depend, and to establish the distribution of food, water, air, housing, mental and physical healthcare, education, transportation, biodiversity, hospitable climates, non-toxicity, peace and safety as universal public entitlements with need-specific accommodations.

Autonomous freedom and increased productivity of meta-industrial labour (rather than of capital) support future historical transformations in which what is now termed 'production' becomes subordinated to the ends of social reproduction in the creation of public and common good. Rather than producing elite luxuries through increasing leisure time and consumption for a few via super-exploitation of the many, luxuries in post-capitalist decolonised cultures of care could be built through collective experience. For example, rather than externalising the labour of meal preparation from the public economy as a privatised burden on housewived cooks, or decreasing socially necessary labour time by replacing meals with fast-food, citizens of degrowth societies might enjoy ecological/economic efficiencies of food prepared in communal kitchens, as well as pleasures enjoyed during creative caring through food preparation, and during slow convivial feasting in communal meals. Such non-market choices could generate valuable forms of common wealth.

Conclusion

Pathways towards degrowth must reduce and redirect flows of energy and material on every scale, and reconfigure hierarchical binaries on every axis, from humans over other nature to production over reproduction. Ecofeminist and decolonial feminist thought contribute by showing how the gendered subalternisation of vital groups and realms works to organise and to justify (super) exploitation of people and other nature, together with asymmetrical exchange. Feminist constructive responses help to envision and to practice emancipatory strategies for changing society-nature metabolisms; and to find hope and inspiration among a rich diversity of identities, practices and perspectives. As Mariam Abazeri (2022, p. 1) expresses it:

> By engaging in decolonial feminist praxis, degrowth stands to better address, dislodge, and reimagine the elements and relations that maintain an ideology of growth, building instead towards a stronger coalition across movements that encourages socially just and ecologically sustainable futures.

Feminist histories make clear that the contemporary identification of masculinities with market production and femininities with reproduction and care is not natural or universal, nor is the subordination of the second to the first. While this relatively recent gender model has interacted successfully with racial-colonial capitalism to help generate colossal profit, it also operates at the heart of growing ecosocial crises. Journeys towards degrowth futures need ecofeminist and decolonial thought and practice to instead recognise and support caring and regenerative responsibilities, local ecological knowledges, and diverse roles and identities.

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FOSTERING DEGROWTH IN MEN
Beyond masculinity and the gender binary

Bob Pease

Introduction

In one of the few published accounts of masculinity and degrowth, Smith Khanna (2021) notes that there is a conspicuous absence of analyses of hegemonic masculinity in degrowth scholarship. He argues that political ecologists and degrowth theorists have neglected the importance of deconstructing and challenging masculinities and masculinist practices that perpetuate the economic growth paradigm. This observation and argument comes in the context of recent recognition that ecofeminism and feminist political ecology have made significant contributions to degrowth theorising and practice (Paulson 2020; Abazeri 2022; Schmelzer et al. 2022; FaDAWriting Collective et al. 2023; Figueroa 2023).

In this chapter, I draw upon feminist critiques of economic growth and the emerging masculinities and environment scholarship to foreground the place of masculinity and masculinism in scholarship on degrowth. I critically review the proposals to develop ecological and caring masculinities as responses to feminist critiques and outline why it is important to move beyond masculinity and the gender binary to foster degrowth subjectivities among men. I use Nelson's (2019, p. 3) definition of degrowth as 'a cultural, political and economic movement for social transformation beyond capitalist growth and consumerism, aiming to achieve ecological sustainability and satisfy everyone's basic needs'. I differentiate masculinism from masculinity. While masculinity is primarily used to refer to the traits of men, masculinism is the ideology of patriarchy that legitimates men's dominance (Brittan 1989).

Gendering the growth paradigm

In reviewing key degrowth books of the last decade (D'Alisa et al. 2015; Liegey and Nelson 2020; Stuart et al. 2020; Hickel 2021; Barlow et al. 2020; Schmelzer et al. 2022), Schmetzer et al. are the only authors who acknowledge the contribution of feminist economists to the critique of the economic growth paradigm. The growth paradigm, which promotes the value of economic growth, is gendered (Garlick 2020; Smith Khanna 2021; Horton 2022; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2023), and these gendered dimensions need to be recognised if we are to move towards a degrowth society.

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The gendered dimensions of economic growth and the economistic paradigm take many forms. Neoclassical economics is based on the notion of 'economic man' or '*homo economicus'* which appeared during the rise of industrial capitalism. 'Economic man' is modelled on elite white European men of the period who claim to represent biologically determined characteristics of all homo sapiens (Urbina and Ruiz-Villaverdo 2019). Mellor (1997) made an important feminist contribution in the 1990s, noting the gendered construction of 'economic man', whereby modern Western economic systems were dominated by men and gendered assumptions were enshrined in modern economic theory. She was careful to avoid the essentialist argument that women were naturally more attuned to nature, while critiquing cultural feminist views that celebrated this supposed essential difference, and liberal feminist views that encouraged women to be more rational, scientific and reasoned like men. She observed back then that green perspectives often did not engage with gendered analyses, which many would argue is largely still the case. Importantly, for this analysis, she noted that 'economic man' was only able to exist if he failed to acknowledge that he was embedded and embodied within ecological systems, and that a woman could become 'economic man' if she adhered to the same so-called economic rationality. Gregoratti and Raphael (2019) also emphasise the historical significance of Maria Mies' feminist anti-capitalist critique of economic growth and Marilyn Waring's analysis of the devaluing of women's contribution to wealth in degrowth scholarship.

Inspired by this early feminist work, Garlick (2020) explores the affinity between masculinity and neoliberalism. He notes the neglect of gendered analyses in critical theory accounts of capitalism and neoliberalism and examines the role of hegemonic masculinities in exacerbating economic inequalities. Drawing upon Connell, Schwalbe and Hearn, he demonstrates the role of 'transnational business masculinity' in the functioning of neoliberal capitalist institutions, the processes by which human beings are turned into 'men' who reproduce and expand capitalism and the ways in which the transnational capitalist class is gendered and operates within financial markets dominated by men.

Horton (2022) grounds this gendered analysis in her case study of US-based billionaires and advocacy groups who promote neoliberal economic principles and models. In her research into ultra-wealthy men, she demonstrates that elite class identity is interconnected with gender and race and that masculinity and gender-coded values and practices naturalise and universalise economic growth and the subsequent social and environmental outcomes that flow from it. Everything from right-wing populist discourse about women and immigrants, to notions about courage and risk taking in markets, through to the separation of productive work and social reproduction are premised upon masculinist principles and deeply gendered neoliberal ideologies.

The separation of production, which is coded masculine, from reproduction, which is coded feminine, is at the heart of the growth imperative. Consequently, it is important to understand how masculinities (and femininities) reproduce and are impacted by the growth paradigm (FaDA Writing Collective et al. 2023). Throughout the historical development of capitalism, men and masculinity were disconnected from caring and reproduction and were subjected to economic processes and interconnections with class and race to orient them towards their role in economic markets (Paulson et al. 2022).

Critical scholarship on men and masculinities brings a particular lens to the process of gendering economic growth. It highlights the ways in which masculinist priorities have led to social and ecological crises that have disproportionately impacted on women, and those marginalised by race and class, while benefitting class-privileged white men in the Global North (Smith Khanna 2021). It also highlights the importance of understanding how masculinism is internalised in the subjectivities of all people but especially those of cis-gendered men. Such men are encouraged

to embrace a sovereign, entrepreneurial and individualistic self that is primarily oriented towards economic growth with no consideration of its dependency on the care of others or the natural environment. Thus, what Eversberg and Schmelzer (2023) call the 'growth subject', is gendered and coded masculine. While not all men have internalised growth subjectivities to the same extent, and while women can also enact growth-oriented practices, growth-based societies are inherently patriarchal and male-centric. Consequently, growth subjectivities are primarily enacted by men and reproduced by norms of hegemonic masculinity.

Feminist influences on degrowth theorising and practice

As noted previously, degrowth has been criticised for insufficient acknowledgement of the contribution of ecofeminism, feminist economics and feminist political ecology on degrowth scholarship (Gregoratti and Raphael 2019; FaDA Writing Collective et al. 2023; Smith Khanna 2021; Talgo 2023). The importance of feminist theorising and its influences in recent years is addressed by Paulson et al. (Chapter 29, this volume). My aim here is to acknowledge this contribution as a backdrop to considerations of the role of masculinities and masculinism in degrowth scholarship.

Early feminist influences can be traced back to the ecofeminism of the 1970s and onwards. Wichterich (2015) argues that a 'strategic essentialism' is necessary to acknowledge the importance of women having a stronger connection to nature than men. Such analyses have been criticised by some feminists as failing to historicise the Western binary view of gender (Stambke 2020), or insufficiently acknowledging decolonial feminist critiques of ecofeminism (Abazeri 2022). Talgo (2023), however, argues that while the charge of essentialism may be relevant for some ecofeminist positions, the essentialism claim largely misrepresents the ecofeminist argument that primarily emphasises how patriarchy's exploitation of all that is feminine is at the heart of ecological exploitation.

Materialist ecofeminist approaches focus more on the sexual division of labour that assigns women to caring roles in the family and caring occupations in the public sphere. They emphasise the material conditions of women's lives and the work that they are prescribed in order to establish links between women and nature that are not biologically determined (MacGregor 2006). Mellor (2017) examines the conditions of women's work and also the construction of 'economic man', whereby men are assumed to be mobile, fit, able-bodied and with no domestic or caring responsibilities. Such men are alienated from the processes of real life.

Gregoratti and Raphael (2019) note the reliance of degrowth scholarship on masculinist ontologies and epistemologies. For example, Demaria et al. (2013), in their analysis of six sources of the degrowth imaginary, fail to acknowledge the contribution of feminist scholars to any of their sources of degrowth. They do not recognise the feminist understanding of the social value of reproductive work. Furthermore, they generally do not acknowledge that the human domination of nature is predominantly a masculinist project.

Although degrowth scholarship has more recently started to engage with feminist analyses, many feminist observers have argued that gender has too often been included as an 'add-on' rather than incorporating a fundamental rethink of theorising and practice (Stambke 2020; Dengler and Lang 2021; Smith Khanna 2021; FaDA Writing Collective et al. 2023). The key issue that feminist analyses draw our attention to is that of the gendered division of labour and the responsibility that women have for unpaid work (Dengler and Lang 2021). While care is sometimes acknowledged as a key issue in degrowth theorising, it isn't always understood through a feminist lens. If the gendered division of care work is not addressed, or if care is understood through a gender essentialist

frame, men's resistance to sharing the burden of care, and their reframing of care in masculinist terms, is likely to prevail.

How do we explain the omission of these feminist critiques of economic growth? Smith Khanna (2021) suggests that the neglect of feminist theorising may be due in part to the threat that feminist ideas pose to hegemonic masculinity. Given that high-profile degrowth theorising was predominantly a product of elderly white men in the Global North, such men may not be open to considerations of feminist influences (FaDA Writing Collective et al. 2023). This resistance also operates in a range of unconscious and subconscious ways. In failing to acknowledge the rich contribution of feminist thought, they are also failing to recognise the forms of resistance that men in general may have to degrowth values and principles.

Promoting degrowth imaginaries for men

Degrowth literature gives significant emphasis to the importance of promoting degrowth imaginaries (Latouche 2014; Buchs and Koch 2018; Diez-Gutierrez and Diaz-Nafria 2019; Feola 2019; Liegey and Nelson 2020; Muraca 2020; Hickel 2021) as an alternative to the embeddedness of growth and economistic imaginaries in people's subjectivities. Diez-Gutierreze and Diaz-Nafria (2019) argue that the capitalist imaginary has colonised people's minds and subjectivities to the extent that economic growth just seems like 'common sense'. The response is to decolonise the growth-orientated imaginary and to construct alternative forms of subjectification that challenge the self-entrepreneurship that forms the neoliberal subject.

Feola (2019) also notes the importance of decolonising the imaginary in promoting degrowth. As well as transforming social, economic and political institutions that foster endless growth, it will be necessary to change the deeply held beliefs that reproduce the growth imaginary. Thus, it is important for people to liberate themselves from capitalist and neoliberal ideologies, ideologies and world views that are deeply gendered. This involves creating space for exploration of alternatives to challenge complicity with capitalist ideologies and institutions, and the productivist and techno-scientist pillars of development.

As the drive for economic growth exists within individuals as well as in society, decolonisation of the imaginary deconstructs the psychological structures that inform the motivations, beliefs and feelings that shape our view of the world (Natale et al. 2016). This means that we have to open ourselves up to critical reflections on our internalised images of the world around us. This may be destabilising, given how deeply embedded the growth paradigm is in any Westernised person's subjectivity. However, considerations of the negative impact of growth-oriented consumerism may open up cracks about more healthy outcomes for people (Buchs and Koch 2018).

Two key dimensions of degrowth social imaginaries are commoning (Helfrich and Bollier 2015; Barbagallo et al. 2019; Euler and Gauditz 2020) and conviviality (Deriu 2015; Magdolena 2020). While both of these relational practices involve forming more cooperative relationships between individuals and others that move beyond the concept of the autonomous rational and sovereign individual (Hansen and Zechner 2019; Nowicka 2019), these concepts in the degrowth scholarship are usually discussed without any reference to gender and without any acknowledgement that the autonomous rational and sovereign individual is predominantly a man who is endeavouring to live up to imperatives of masculinity and manhood. In promoting degrowth imaginaries, neglect of the gender dimensions means that men are likely to reproduce masculinist ontologies and subjectivities.

Degrowth principles and models inform certain eco-collaborative housing, utopian settlements and eco-villages (see, for example, *Housing for Degrowth* edited by Nelson and Schneider 2019).

Hagbert (2019, p. 64) in this collection refers to 'feminist re-imaginings of everyday life' to challenge traditional household configurations and Widmer and Schneider (2019) espouses the importance of sharing household work between genders. However, the extent to which these alternatives are realised is unclear.

While there is some debate about whether eco-villages represent a template for degrowth (Verco 2019), Simon and Zimmerman (2020) set out to explore the link between ecological masculinities and what they describe as 'the degrowth mindset' in eco-villages. They found that men in these villages did not believe that patriarchy was present. However, the men strongly identified with traditional forms of masculinity and occupied most leadership roles within the communities leading to significant gender divides. Similar research on gender and sustainability in ecological intentional communities by Bhatia (2019) found that women in Navdanya Bioconservation Farm undertook most of the agricultural labour because they were seen to be more nurturing by nature, thus reinforcing naturalised assumptions about gender.

Twenty-six women who formed an eco-village in England without men were asked why men could not live there. While the women emphasised that they were not anti-men and that most of them had brothers, sons and male lovers, they thought that at this point in time British men were 'too masculine' for the project to work in the cooperative way the women envisaged it (Chaudhuri 2023). Pickerell (2016) found similar gender tensions in eco-homes. While the participants espoused their support for gender-neutral practices, there was a strongly held belief among the men that women have less bodily capacity to undertake particular building tasks and so their contribution to eco-building was marginalised. Similar male leadership and sexist views on women are evident in permaculture communities. Leahy (2021) noted the reliance upon masculinist notions of science in promoting permaculture, and while the concept of care was also evident, this was largely seen to be associated with femininity and the work of women.

To date, beyond feminist critiques, Eversberg and Schmelzer (2023) have been the only degrowth theorists to analyse how the growth subject in affluent societies of the Global North is interconnected with white, male, heterosexual and cisgender privileges. So while degrowth subjectivity is focused upon the positive benefits for men of relationality, conviviality, care and vulnerability, such qualities will involve the challenge of what they call 'male deprivileging'. They recognise that the relational subjectivity of degrowth consciousness is in opposition to the construction of masculinity based on separation, hierarchy, independence and dominance. Because the growth subject is coded masculine, growth-dependent masculinities will need to be transformed. While they suggest that men need to experience themselves as 'needy', as an antithesis to masculine identities, I prefer the language of ontological vulnerability (Pease 2021) to capture the interdependence and entanglement of men with other humans, non-human others and the planet.

How do we bring about such a change in the growth imaginary and foster a sense of ontological vulnerability in men? Elsewhere I have suggested that men must acknowledge their relational dependence on other humans, non-humans and the ecology of the planet (Pease 2021). This means breaking their connection to a humanistic, unitary and masculinist subject. Men are encouraged to present themselves as competent, strong, independent and successful, all of which foster a sense of invulnerability. Encompassing vulnerability will entail a departure from dominant conceptions of masculinity. If the growth subject is in various ways coded as masculine, then embracing vulnerability and practising degrowth may feel unmasculine or even emasculating to many men.

Cole (2021), drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari, proposes a strategy of education, consciousness raising and schizoanalysis to explore ways of escaping the deeply internalised drives and desires that perpetuate economic growth. This will involve a form of unconsciousness-raising to

allow a degrowth consciousness to emerge. Such a process means developing a rhizomatic mode of thinking that challenges what Cole calls the Phallocene, which focuses on the gendered dimensions of the Anthropocene.

Masculinity and environmental destruction: implications for degrowth

In the past 10 years, there has been an expanding body of scholarship exploring the links between masculinity and environmental and ecological destruction (Pease 2016; Hultman and Pulé 2018; Paulson and Boose 2019; Anderson 2020; Pulé and Hultman 2021; Mellström and Pease 2023). Drawing upon the ecofeminist scholarship noted earlier, this literature investigates how different forms of masculinity are interconnected with environmental harm.

Daggett (2018) coins the term 'petro-masculinity' to describe the ways in which masculinity perpetuates, misogyny, racism and climate change denial. Similarly, Paulson and Boose (2019) identify connections between exploitation of nature and masculine identities, whereby elite representations of masculinity underpin the power structures that drive environmental harm. Meanwhile, subordinate masculinities are socialised as beasts of burden in industries that degrade their bodies and environments. Masculinity is affirmed through men's mastery over nature, through the high consumption of meat and through their involvement in the live meat industry. Furthermore, men control the military and dominate the fossil fuel industries, drive larger cars, travel more internationally and engage in more carbon-intensive forms of recreation (Nagel and Lies 2022).

Somma and Tolleson-Rinehart (1997) found that it was not gender difference in awareness and concern about the environment that was significant. Rather, their research showed that women and men who were supportive of feminism were more aware and concerned about the environment than women and men more generally. So gender differences between men and women in relation to climate change may be less to do with gender as a sex category and more to do with positioning, critical gender consciousness and feminist awareness.

Wilson (2023) identifies how men with the highest identification with masculinity distanced themselves from attitudes and behaviours associated with environmental awareness. In the United States she found that men who identified most with traits of hegemonic masculinity viewed environmental concerns as being 'feminine' and, consequently, were to be avoided. For many men, to enact pro-environment behaviours unsettled their precarious masculinity because of the associations with care, nurturance and altruism. Kaul and Buchanan (2023) also make the point that it is not biological sex itself that is the problem (by way of an example, that XY chromosomes cause destructive behaviour), but rather misogyny and masculinism. While men, on average, are likely to have higher levels of misogyny and masculinism, women, non-binary and trans people can also internalise these imaginaries. This means that the 'bread-winner' masculinities identified by Hultman and Pulé (2018) are not enacted by men alone.

Notwithstanding ecofeminist analyses of the links between the oppression of women and environmental exploitation, there has not been significant interrogation into the ways in which masculinity and men's practices reproduce the gender binary at the heart of ecological crises (Anderson 2020). While some men are embracing environmentalism and are active in sustainability projects and the degrowth movement, masculinities also influence and shape the nature of that involvement. Research shows that while women are more likely to talk about ethics, justice and care as motivations for their involvement in environmental campaigns, men tend to cite arguments focused on science and business (Anderson 2020). Hultman and Pulé (2018) refer to one form of this as 'ecomodern masculinity', whereby men contend that their protection of the environment is not in conflict with profit or high-energy lifestyles. Dockstander and Bell (2020) argue that this

ecomodern masculinity is a particular type of 'hybrid masculinity', which enables wealthy men to reject hegemonic masculinity at the same time as they reproduce the existing social order.

Eisen and Yamashita (2017) discuss similar concerns with the development of hybrid masculinity where men describe themselves as caring and talk about integrating feminine characteristics into their identities. However, such men were shown to co-opt the notion of caring to gain more status and consequently to reinforce their gender dominance. While these men wanted to distance themselves from traditional patriarchal norms and behaviours, they did not want to challenge their dominant and privileged positions within gender relations. Eisen and Yamashita's research demonstrated the ways in which some men appropriated characteristics deemed to be progressive to reinforce their power over women and other men. In their view, maintaining some form of masculinity is advantageous to men's interests.

We see this masculinist response through the different motivations men express in their support for veganism. Many male vegans, for example, promote an image of vegans as 'real men', who are concerned about personal and environmental health. Greenebaum and Dexter (2017) suggest that many vegan men are not reconstructing masculinity but rather are repurposing it to reflect new forms of paternalistic protection. Such men demonstrate how they can gain muscles without consuming meat to make veganism appear manly (as in the 2018 documentary, *The Game Changers*).

MacGregor (2017) argues that environmentalism and responses to climate change have also become masculinised, through the dominance of science and security as frames for addressing global warming. Technology and geo-engineering solutions are privileged over social intervention. Fleming (2021) refers to the climate engineers who are in search of the technological fix. Such an approach is less concerned with reducing greenhouse gas emissions and more oriented towards seeking to control the weather and climate. Fleming also ponders the potential use that governments and the military would make of such technological developments should they come to fruition.

Elite men, or as Fleming (2021) refers to them, Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) men, dominate the organisations that have responsibility for addressing climate change. From the male scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to the predominantly male celebrity spokesmen on climate change to the male leaders of the environmental lobby organisations, the politics of climate change are shaped by masculinist, WEIRD, discourses. This is so even as female representation in science is increasing. Thus, the dominant discourse of climate change is as a scientific technical problem that requires technical and scientific solutions. Furthermore, from a degrowth perspective, the central focus on climate change is problematic as it is a symptom of the wider problem of growth that should be addressed.

Men tend to be more oriented towards technical and scientific environmental mitigation projects. Alaimo (2009) alerts readers to the masculinity that underpins the frameworks of scientific objectivity that purport to explain climate change science. In her view, much of global climate change science represents a transcendent view that is unable to acknowledge either vulnerability or gender and sexual diversity. Terry (2009) says that the computer modelling and technology involved in so-called solutions to climate change are stereotypically masculinist and do not allow for an understanding of the impact of gender inequality on climate change.

Ecological masculinities as a response to critiques of economic growth

Eversberg and Schmelzer (2023) ponder the question of what role the reconstruction of masculinities can play in moving men away from a dependency on economic growth and masculinised responses to environmental harm. What alternative forms of masculinity are conceivable to foster

degrowth subjectivities? A number of degrowth scholars have proposed ecological masculinities as an alternative to growth-oriented masculinities. Smith Khanna (2021) argues that ecological masculinities place care for oneself and for humans and non-humans as well as care for the planet at the centre of men's subjectivity. Simon and Zimmerman (2020) similarly argue that ecological masculinities are a necessary prerequisite for a degrowth mindset. Hopkins et al. (2023) also suggest that ecological masculinities would promote conviviality and relationality among men and encourage them to move away from a growth-oriented mindset. Ecological masculinities are seen as a pro-ecological form of alternative subjectivity for men that would enable them to sever their abusive relationship with the non-human world.

It is clear that men (and others who are masculinised) need to be encouraged to move beyond the constructed normative model of rational, economic man that has dominated economic thought and growth imperatives. However, is ecological masculinities the best pathway towards a new subjectivity for men? Over 25 years ago, Twine (1997) argued against the concept of ecomasculinities as a way of reframing Western men's relationship with nature. The problem with some ecomasculinity approaches that emphasise the lack of 'balance' in men and the importance of men discovering the 'feminine' within themselves or their 'natural maleness' is that men's domination of women is neglected. Mellor (1992) criticised early attempts by men to respond to ecofeminism by embracing the feminine principle or to find masculine and feminine balance as embracing an ecofeminine rather than ecofeminist position because they ignore the power relations between men and women. While this feminist work pre-dates the development of ecological masculinities, this critique is relevant to current attempts to create an ecomasculine position.

Jordan (2023) argues that men need to learn what she calls 'gift economy logic'. To achieve this, she suggests that men need to be liberated from masculinity to enable them to adopt forms of collaborative decision-making, caring connections with others, and an openness to experiences of vulnerability. For her it is not only current gender roles that need to be challenged but the gender dichotomy itself.

Towards care narratives and practices by men

Many feminist degrowth scholars have identified care as a main foundation for an economy oriented towards degrowth (Dengler and Stunk 2018; Gomez et al. 2020; Dengler and Lang 2021; Pungas 2021). Key to this shift is the transformation of the gendered division of labour through the revaluing of care work (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2023). Growth-based economies are built upon the invisibility of care work that is predominantly undertaken by women. An alternative feminist ethic of care is proposed whereby societies would be reorganised around care. The concept of care, as articulated by Tronto (2013), involves both paid and unpaid care and is concerned not only with care for other humans but also care for non-human animals and the planet as a whole. Transforming the gendered division of labour means that men, women and people of other gender identities will need to embrace care as a key principle of organising.

Men are likely to be more resistant to embracing care as an alternative narrative as they have less experience of relational ontologies. If we accept, as suggested by Aposolova and Gauthier-Mamaril (2018), that the self is constituted through and in relations with others, it will mean that men will have to redefine themselves as not being autonomous and sovereign individuals disconnected from the lives of others. This will require that men open themselves to a more fluid understanding of gender that is able to embrace that which has previously been deemed to be feminine. Paulson et al. (2022) have noted that men are often characterised as 'destroyers'. However, their research with Brazilian men who are farmers in the Atlantic Forrest demonstrates the capacity of men to

form caring relations with non-human others through their experiences of joy and affection for trees and the earth. They provide an inspiring example of men reconstituting their life worlds through interspecies relations and the valuing of their biophysical world.

In ways similar to the embracing of ecological masculinities, the concept of caring masculinities has been proposed in degrowth as a strategy to reconfigure the gendered division of labour (Paulson et al. 2022; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2023). If hegemonic masculinity is premised upon being care-free, then caring masculinities are masculinities that associate manliness with ideals and practices of care. While acknowledging that men can care and nurture, Nayak (2023) argues that the concept of 'caring masculinities' faces the danger of 'masculinising care' in ways that reproduce rather than transform the gendered division of labour. She emphasises the importance of focusing on the material configurations of care and the colonising practices that create multiple intersecting inequalities. Otherwise, caring masculinities will further entrench a new masculine hegemony in the neoliberal economy.

While it is important to develop caring as a post-gendered activity, we need to understand how the social construction of masculinities and femininities frame the ways in which men and women care. I have argued (Pease 2018) that when men do care, they are under normative pressures to do so in ways that do not challenge their masculinity. In contexts where caring is associated with women and subordination, this contradicts the expectations of masculinity which requires men to be dominant. The issue is whether the equation of masculinity with dominance can be broken to encompass care and nurturance or whether men's capacity to care and nurture others and the environment will require men to break their identification with masculinity.

I argue against the notion of caring masculinities expressed by Elliot (2015). Caring masculinities are still based on masculine identities that reconstruct masculinity towards more emotional and relational qualities rather than break with masculine identification per se. For some, caring masculinities provide a pathway for men to trouble traditional masculinity. However, while it is important for men to develop more nurturing and caring capacities, I argue that in doing so, they should break their identification with masculinity and the gender binary.

Beyond the gender binary

In contemporary understandings of the gender binary, both sex and gender are framed in terms of dualisms of male and female and masculinity and femininity. Anthropologists, decolonial and non-binary gender theorists have been historically critical of a dualistic conception of gender because such a dualism is founded on a hierarchical relationship between men and women and subsequently reinforces patriarchy (Reeser 2010). As modern Western paradigms have established and institutionalised such dualisms in ways that are deeply hierarchical, they legitimate the exploitation of those who are relegated as inferior. Consequently, patriarchy is legitimated by men's domination of women, and the mastery of nature is legitimated by the dominance of culture over nature and so on (Haraway 2016). Of all the dualisms, the nature/culture divide seems to be the foundational binary upon which all other dualisms flow. This dualism is gendered in that nature and the body are relegated as feminine, while culture, rationality and the mind are attributed to men (Gunnarson 2013).

The equation of the human with men, and nature with women, means that the characteristic of elite white men will always constitute the privileged side of the binary. The onus is on those who are valued by the dualism to construct subjectivities that subvert the identity of the master. Only then can men stand with women and with nature. Plumwood (1993) suggests that it is the denial of dependency and the myth of autonomy that leads men to dominate women, non-human animals

and nature, treating them all as instrumental to patriarchal and capitalist interests. In contrast to an atomistic and egotistic masculinity, Plumwood encourages the development of an ecological and relational self that values caring relations and openness to and empathy with others. It opens us up to new understandings of what it means to be human (and posthuman) and how we should relate to nature. Relationality and vulnerability go hand in hand as does our openness to others, which leaves us susceptible to harm (Boubil 2018). It is our embeddedness and entanglement with other humans, non-humans and the material world that makes us vulnerable. It means recognising our mortality, and opening ourselves to pain and suffering as we express our affective responses to ecological disasters.

Queer theorising recognises that while it is important to value the feminine, ultimately, it is important to move beyond the dualism of gender (Nelson 2012; Stambke 2020; Gaard 2021). Stambke (2020) outlines a framework for queering the growth paradigm, drawing upon queer ecologies (Gaard 2021) which reframe relationships between nature, gender and labour. A feminist queer perspective not only interrogates biological categories such as 'nature' and 'women' and explores non-binary perspectives; it also opens up new ways of understanding the construction of 'man' and 'masculinity' as being devoid of care (Schmelzer et al. 2022). Figueroa (2023), for example, notes that in the process by which men become 'manly', they internalise the belief of having to be in control and consequently are less able to demonstrate care, for themselves, for others, for non-humans and for the planet.

For many feminists and their aspiring allies, gender equality is the major objective to address the problems associated with men's domination of women and nature (Braunschweig 2020). In this view, the concept of gender is not understood to inherently embody inequality. Rather it is seen as socially constructed differences which have only a contingent relationship to power and status. This is the premise underpinning attempts to reform rigid masculinities and promote ecological and caring variants. However, the idea that men and women can interact as equals, while gender is still in place is flawed (Pineda 2021). If gender was equal it would no longer be recognisable as gender. Similar to the Marxist analysis of class, where the aim is not to create class equality but rather struggle for a class-less society (Wright 2012), I argue that we should aim for a gender-less rather than gender-equal society to address the growth paradigm.

Degrowth feminist queer ecology provides inspiration for fostering an appreciation of diversity in nature (Gomez et al. 2020). In emphasising the importance of moving beyond heterosexual relationships and cis-gendered identities, it encourages exploration of alternative forms of care that embrace the concept of 'otherwise'. Such a move will require confronting heteronormativity, cisgenderism and the concept of gender itself. Abolitionists also recognise the relationship between the functioning of the carceral state and dominant forms of masculinity and consequently they too advocate for the deconstruction of masculinities and gender categories (Appell and Davis 2011). This does not mean that individuals would be prevented from identifying with masculinity and femininity (Braunschweig 2020). Rather, it is that these identities would not be constructed in relation to structures of power and people would not be forced into a rigid gender binary. It is the structural base of gender as a relationship of power that should be abolished. Eventually, however, gender identities would become less important and wither away.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have drawn upon feminist critiques of economic growth and masculinities and environment scholarship to foreground the place of masculinity and masculinism in theorising degrowth. I have argued that it is important for people to liberate themselves from gendered

capitalist and neoliberal ideologies and to foster alternative degrowth subjectivities. Such degrowth subjectivities require men to develop more nurturing and caring capacities. I have argued, however, that alternative ecological and caring masculinities reinscribe an essentialist gender identity in men, reinforce men's discomfort with the feminine and reproduce heteronormativity and binary assumptions about sex, gender and sexuality. Feminist queer theorising offers an alternative pathway for cisgendered men. To embrace a relational ethic of care for themselves, other humans, non-humans and the planet, and break with hegemonic masculinity that reproduces unsustainable economic growth, men will need to loosen their identification with categorical and bounded notions of masculinity, gender binarism and the sovereign self.

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31

DEGROWTH, URBANISATION AND SPATIAL PLANNING

Federico Savini

Introduction

Urban futurists celebrate cities as hubs for socio-technical innovation, political empowerment, sustainable innovation, tolerance and democracy (Keidar 2023). In these simplistic views, urbanisation is said to be the pathway to sustainability, climate resilience and adaptation. Citing the rise of aggregate income among both poorer and richer urban dwellers, many urban economists suggest that contemporary urbanisation, but in a greener form, can solve multiple social and ecological crises as, for example, Peck (2016). This chapter challenges this view, arguing that contemporary urbanisation relies on an extractivist cycle of perpetual growth and dispossession. These processes compel urban governments to seek further growth to deal with the resulting social and ecological damages. This increases the urban ecological footprint and demands new socio-ecological fixes that, in turn, exacerbate the growth imperative and fuel cleavages between the urban and the rural.

Cities are urbanised regions, territories and systems that host built environments on the majority of their land (for a discussion, see Brenner and Keil 2011). This definition excludes rural and non-built areas located relatively far from dense urban systems. However, these places are essential for the continuation of urbanisation. The processes that drive economic growth in contemporary capitalism are structurally rooted in the schism between urban areas and their planetary hinterlands. This chapter sketches the broad strokes of a degrowth agenda for urbanisation that decouples the provision of essential urban services from perpetually increasing land values through economic innovation. I also argue that spatial planning for degrowth should build on existing spatial degrowth practices to create the political power needed to sustain a degrowth urban agenda.

Degrowth in urbanisation is a multi-scalar political project that aims to downscale and slow the metabolism of urban areas through a dual strategy – a planned reduction in urban production and consumption, and a planned increase in essential services for urban dwellers, particularly in neighbourhoods where services are limited or totally absent (Krähmer 2022; Savini 2021). Addressing the social inequality that drives urbanisation allows us to liberate cities from the growth imperative and, instead, nurture local democracy.

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The cycle of urbanisation under capitalism: innovation, obsolescence, debt and renewal

There is no single pattern of urban growth nor a universal causal relationship between spatial, economic and environmental change. Rather, urbanisation patterns reflect the governance structures and political-historical legacies of each national context (Robinson 2022). Furthermore, urbanisation patterns are often shaped by unpredictable events like extreme weather, conflicts or pandemics. Therefore, a degrowth urbanisation project must focus not on the abstract process of 'urbanisation' but on the ways that cities are locked into the economic growth imperative. The following sections review four key elements of this cycle to understand their relationships with social displacement and ecological impacts, and include a diagram illustrating these factors within a web of relations.

Economic innovation as imperative

The economic innovation imperative is central to contemporary capitalism. In a growth-led economy, urban areas (and businesses and states) that do not encourage economic and technical innovation tend to lose in the global marketplace (Savitch and Kantor 2002). Without economic innovation, cities 'shrink', often into a recession. The resultant loss of economic activities leads to less investment inflow, the deskilling of human capital, demographic loss, and an overall decrease in public and private incomes (Haase et al. 2014). Facing stagnating economic performance and competitiveness, governments tend to sell out essential urban services, making them even more dependent on rekindling economic investments to maintain service quality (de Kraker et al. 2024).

Capital protects economic value by 'fixing' surplus capital into infrastructure, land and real estate (Harvey 2001). This means that economic innovation directly impacts the urban built environment. New investments often target places of spatial obsolescence (but rent potential, as I explain later) – where the existing spatial, architectural and technological infrastructure does not facilitate or reflect new patterns of production and consumption. Such spatial obsolescence has ushered in the transition to post-industrial economies in Western cities.

With the rise of service-based economies and displacement of manufacturing to late-industrialising countries, Western cities were confronted with vacant and underused factories, shipyards, mines, railyards and housing. This resulted in declining incomes, rising unemployment and overall decreases in urban quality (Hutton 2004). These cities became prime targets for new capital investments. Similarly, today's underground pipes, parking lots and logistics hubs are unfit for modern smart technologies, hydrogen-led energy systems and electrified mobility (Sæther 2022).

Obsolescence – essentially undervalued real capital – attracts investments. This process occurs faster in places with a large surplus of available global capital (such as wealthy global cities) or where investments are largely backed by public money (as in China's urban periphery). Investors – whether pension funds, real estate trusts or even private homeowners – tend to target areas where return-on-investment ratios are expected to be highest (Kholodilin et al. 2017). Capital flows fastest into built environments when there is rapid economic and technological innovation, large sums of incoming capital to urban areas and secure investments. For instance, there are growing investments in energy-efficient buildings in places where governments explicitly endorse climate adaptation and mitigation.

Debt and renewal

In financialised capitalism, almost all incoming investments, on land and real-estate at least, are funded on debt. Debt lubricates and accelerates urban economic growth in several ways. First, it locks economic actions into an obligation to produce long-term profit, and it channels funding to high-gain sectors, which are rarely essential public services (Kirkpatrick 2016). Second, it turns cities into spaces for entrepreneurial agents – from businesses to governments – to enact strategies for land valorisation (Taşan-kok 2010). Third, debt expands the economic value of land and real assets, and works as an incentive to stimulate economic innovation and renewal especially where debts are so large as to require national financial support (Crouch and Le Galès 2012). For example, the large-scale waterfront renewals that characterised the mid-1980s post-industrial urban growth strategies were largely funded by public and private debts (facilitated by the restructuring of global financial institutions) that created investment funds that still govern large urban agglomerations. The very existence of debt requires the pursuit of new investments to generate profits through increases in land value.

In an urban context, the provision of essential services through public and private debt is also locked to the valorisation of land and the growth of the local economy. It pushes cities towards further renewal – to retrofit, adapt, and convert existing usages and to focus on the urban fabric that can generate the highest return on investments (Ward and Aalbers 2016). The imperative to push land rent, retrofit real estate and adapt mobility infrastructures increases the likelihood that governments will commodify their assets, often through public shareholder companies, especially when their spending capacity is reduced by welfare state downsizing and when they have already lost capital through speculative choices (Peck and Whiteside 2016). This is particularly true in areas that struggle to attract private investments. The twin problem of increasing debt and falling land values leads to depopulation and worsening living conditions.

Financialisation does not only create structural dependencies of public goods on global capital but also strengthens the beliefs that sustain the growth ideology. Renewal is ultimately a socio-physical process that alters the way dwellers (and their governments) perceive homes and land – not as places to live in but as assets (García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016). This logic drove urban growth at the turn of the century, notably through the privatisation of social housing stock in the mid-1990s and the following waves of demolitions and renewal.

Figure 31.1 illustrates the growth cycle of urbanisation analysed in this chapter, distinguishing three sub-cycles indiscernible in practice. The built environment is a cycle of innovation, renewal, expansion and innovation. The socio-economic cycle is one of displacement, urban consumption, obsolescence and debt. The ecological cycle involves raw materials demand, increases in the land required to supply them, and waste, which is partially reused to supply growth.

Displacement, marginalisation and urban consumption

The compulsion to seek profit-generating economic innovation always results in displacement and marginalisation. In urban areas with overwhelming private land ownership, such imperatives to renew, demolish, retrofit and increase rents foster displacement (even when renter protection schemes are available). Displacement takes the form of gentrification in areas with high rent gaps, (sub)urbanisation or segregation in areas with lower rent gaps, and industrial development in formerly rural areas. Displacement is, therefore, both a consequence of the compulsion to growth and one of its drivers. Under capitalism, the production of subalternity (the displaced) is an essential

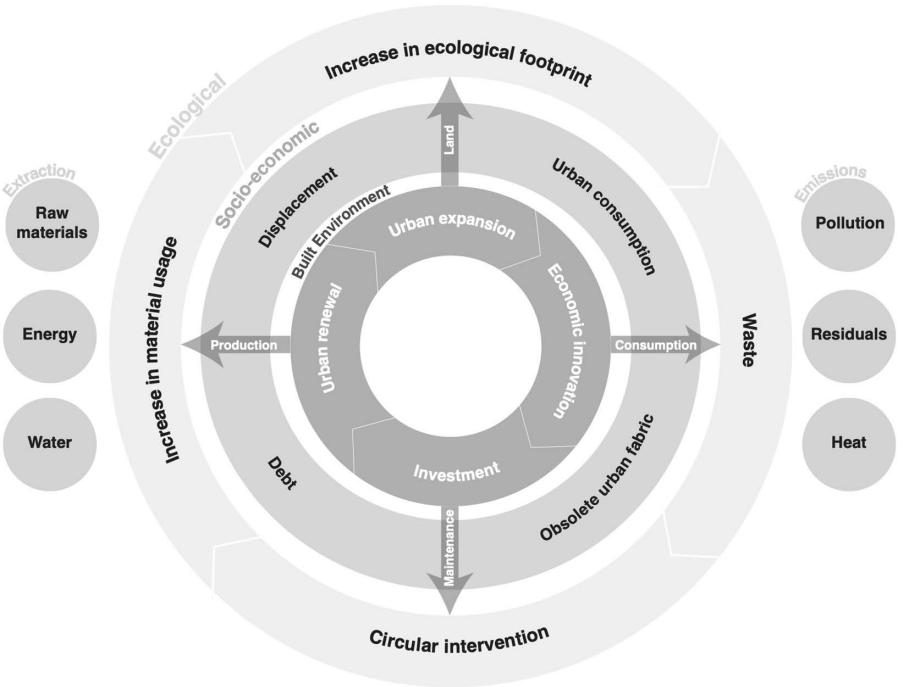

Figure 31.1 The growth cycle, and three sub-cycles, of urbanisation.

trigger for urban growth – capitalism relies on the production of inferior 'others' for its survival (Angelo 2017; Omstedt and Ebner 2024).

These processes are both local and global, as evidenced by the displacement of lower-income groups, those living under precarious rent, marginalised and under-represented urban social groups, informal dwellers, and those who depend on underused dwellings at the margins of cities. They are also visible in urbanisation's sacrifice zones, de-peasantisation, rural depopulation and land grabbing for (urban) extraction as, for instance, in rural China, inner Canada and Arctic Scandinavia. The socially constructed relation of inferiority between urban centres and rural areas is both political and economic – it is constitutive of urbanised capital and thrives on an ideology that positions cities and urban dwellers as the champions of progress (Spanier and Feola 2022). Therefore, degrowth must pursue urban–rural equality (Smessaert and Feola 2024).

Displacement – both within and beyond dense urban areas – drives urban growth because displaced communities need new places to live. Araghi's (2009) 'accumulation by dispossession' refers to the capital-driven expansion of built infrastructure that accommodates flows of people and goods towards and across cities. It manifests in two ways. First, it increases private expenditure because urbanisation is the everyday process of buying houses, furnishing them, purchasing vehicles or appliances, changing clothing, eating out, paying realtors, signing contracts, estimating home prices, establishing mortgages and so forth. Mass migration into urban areas generates a pool of customers for the urban industry at large. More entrepreneurial cities always prefer to attract highly skilled, high-income groups with higher consumption patterns to accelerate the cycle of economic innovation (Florida 2003). However, this process is not limited to these social groups. The second manifestation of urban consumption comes as investments in urban infrastructure,

such as sanitation, water, railways, heat and electricity networks, urban parks, schools, hospitals, waste disposal and logistics.

The processes of peri-urbanisation, suburbanisation and deruralisation are also expressions of the consumption and urban expansion that drove urbanisation in the Global North throughout the 20th century. Today, these same processes drive the formation of slums, favelas, settlements, urban villages and temporary housing at the fringes of growing mega-cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Shenzhen, Buenos Aires and Mumbai. Unplanned and partially informal settlements – of future urban consumers – ensure future demands for urban consumption (Forrest and Ren 2019; Myers 2021).

Consumption also emerges in logistical and industrial sprawl (Dablanc and Browne 2020). Under favourable conditions, a surge in urban consumption triggers a new wave of economic innovation, which then triggers a new cycle of investments, debt, renewal, displacement and urban consumption. Under capitalism, demands for infrastructure and services push governments and private companies to generate productivity gains, mechanise labour and innovate new technologies of production (Jackson 2009). Sustainability goals entailing developments such as electric mobility, hydrogen-fuelled production, green energy systems and circular water management are also key to this pursuit of efficiency gains that 'green' the urban growth machine (Blühdorn 2014; Jocoy 2018). Eventually, the push to develop new infrastructures will engender new obsolescence, new investments, new debt, new renewal and new displacement. The cycle of growth, now accelerated, starts again.

The ecological costs and fixes of urbanisation

The socio-economic process outlined earlier involves the constant transformation of nature (Kaika et al. 2005). Urban consumption and economic innovation accelerate the flow of materials, water, and energy into urban agglomerations and increase waste, which is regularly displaced from urban areas in far-away wastelands (Baka 2013). Thus, the ecological footprint of cities increases at the same pace as their economic cycle, further eroding surrounding rural and natural areas (Wackernagel et al. 2006). The result is a condition where massive portions of global land are appropriated to maintain dense urban areas and the few who live in them.

The construction industry alone is responsible for approximately 40 per cent of natural resource depletion and 25 per cent of waste globally; in countries of late urbanisation, construction accounts for a whole 12 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). The value chain for concrete used in any medium-sized European city spans the whole world (Bahers and Rosado 2023). The industry is dominated by a handful of corporate giants, exposing the provision of the most important urban material to capital's manipulation (Rutkowski et al. 2024). In an urbanised world, the material demands of some large cities can rival entire nation-states (Swilling et al. 2018). However, many European green governments simply laud declining urban domestic material demand or CO_2 emissions within cities – a new strategy of climate distraction.

Waste – whether inert waste or dissipated heat, residuals or emissions – is the inevitable result of any form of consumption and production. Waste is, in fact, the most representative index of the pace of urbanisation (Swilling et al. 2018). A certain degree of consumption-generated waste can be reinserted into new urban productions through the so-called circular economy that addresses the problems of material supply and waste reuse (Calisto Friant et al. 2023; Savini 2019). Moreover, the environmental impact of the urbanisation cycle could be mitigated through serious programs of maintenance and reuse of the urban fabric. Yet, these circular productions still need virgin materials and energy and, in combination with the pressure to innovate, continue to accelerate the

economic growth cycle outlined earlier. Under a growth-dependent form of urbanisation, circularity triggers economic innovation and new cycles of investment, renewal and consumption.

'Sustainable innovation' programs (green growth) distract attention from the incessant creation of debt, renewal and displacement that characterise the urban growth cycle. They both displace the ecological costs of technological advancement away from urban centres and into renewable infrastructure's sacrifice zones, and further stimulate the economic innovation and land conversion necessary to fuel urbanised capital. Electrification and the renewable supply for larger urban areas inevitably increase land consumption, deforestation, extraction and biodiversity loss far from cities. This affects communities living in those areas and stimulates rural depopulation, rural deskilling, and migration towards urban centres and urban consumption.

In sum, it is impossible to decouple production and consumption. It is not useful to praise voluntary simplicity without questioning the whole urban growth machine. Urban consumption engenders the production of the built environment, while the production of the built environment engenders further consumption of capital, labour, technologies and land.

Spaces of planned degrowth

Spatial planning for degrowth must decouple the provision of essential urban services from the pursuit of economic innovation for economic growth. Importantly, spatial planning has historically been a growth enabler and (green) growth manager. Indeed, public planners' tools and funding for essential services were often structurally tied to the growth imperative (Durrant et al. 2023). Many of these tools were devised as part of neoliberal reforms that accelerated and smoothed the growth cycle to attract investments and guarantee democratic inflows, such as for large-scale development projects (Flyvbjerg et al. 2003), economic regional specialisation and the privatisation of public assets like social housing and railways. These approaches to planning have progressively consolidated economic and political power in highly competitive urban centres and further marginalised less competitive rural areas. The latter have either become degraded and depopulated, or dependent on risky and suboptimal land investments for their economic survival, with highly polluting and destructive economies such as livestock or mining.

Reducing the economic and political inequality between urban centres and rural areas is central to a degrowth agenda. Urbanisation has divided – spatially, politically and ideologically – the sites of consumption, economy and politics from the sites of production and extraction. This schism has further strengthened the growth imperative. Therefore, degrowth should connect the struggles emerging in cities to those in the places where extraction occurs.

To do so requires two political shifts. The first rebalances the relation between urban centres and rural areas around (bio)regional autonomy. This is clearly not an anti-urban agenda of planned relocations or voluntary individual choices to move into self-sufficient rural housing. The second rejects the idea that cities are only sites of service provision or immaterial economies dependent on global hinterlands but instead considers them as sites where the material necessities of life can be nurtured.

Degrowth practice is advanced by grassroots movements that aim to slow and interrupt the urban growth cycle. These include slow mobility campaigns, anti-eviction campaigns, self-generated and self-managed energy systems, cooperative housing and urban agroecology (Barlow et al. 2022; Nelson and Schneider 2018; Savini et al. 2022). Many of these groups actively re-link urban and rural contexts to reconstitute more equal economic and political relations between urban and rural areas. They contain the seeds of degrowth and advance a politics of spatial justice that critiques the growth imperative and its ideology.

However, they are too often limited to a privileged, degrowth-savvy, urbanised middle class. This agenda must reach out to struggles that are not necessarily urban and urban subaltern groups. The degrowth movement must rethink the institutions that sustain growth-dependent urbanisation, not simply improve the living standards of urban dwellers. I have identified three main features of a degrowth approach to urbanisation: the pursuit of autonomy within polycentric settlements; an approach to socio-spatial regulation centred around finity; and a practice of urban design, regulation, landscaping and architecture that is fully committed to 'habitability' (Savini 2021).

Autonomy and bioregionalism

Degrowth requires autonomy from the growth imperative, the need to profit and the pursuit of debt (Asara et al. 2013). Here, autonomy is understood as the freedom of a geographically defined society to self-determine its goals and spatial features. Autonomy is both a political and a bio-physical condition. Politically, autonomy engenders democratic processes independent of economic spheres, such as lobbying and corporate interference (de Bloois et al. 2014). Bio-physically, autonomy means providing the material conditions for survival, such as healthy food, energy, clean water and some degree of waste disposal.

Many economically successful cities are not autonomous – any interruption in the global value chains for food, energy or materials could tip them into socio-economic collapse. While many large urban areas have political influence, they remain dependent on the global politics of material flows. Contra celebratory urbanists, the key arenas of decision-making are not urban or regional but still (inter)national (Barber 2013). This lack of autonomy is accelerated by population growth in urbanised areas, as this increases dependency on global flows and complicates the democratic governance of urban systems.

The industrialist and imperialist (military) approach to growth thrives when urbanised areas lack autonomy. After all, the material dependency of some human settlements on others is an essential strategy of settler colonialism. Certain urbanised zones are de facto-subjugated materially and politically to their external suppliers (Porter and Yiftachel 2019). For example, it is impossible to imagine political autonomy for Palestinians in the highly urbanised regions of the Gaza Strip or West Bank as long as the import of essential goods, labour, water and agrarian resources is tightly controlled by the Israeli state, where the Palestinians de facto hold a subaltern political position.

Degrowth programs pursue both material and political autonomy. Autonomy is a post-capitalist project against the hierarchies of global urban flows that have concentrated power (wealth) in cities to accelerate economic competitiveness. Degrowth envisions polycentric and mutually supportive urban settlements organised around the co-production of essential services – confederations that enable political coordination (Bookchin 1991). Most importantly, such an approach addresses the schism between urban and rural areas and strives for a symmetric and regenerative relationship between built environments and agroecological production.

Bioregionalism – the rescaling of the geopolitics of urbanisation away from globalisation – has already developed conceptual tools for the urban degrowth project (Cato 2012). Bioregionalism revalues localism and self-sufficiency by, first and foremost, focusing on the maintenance of soil properties (Rey 2014; Schneider and Nelson 2018). Yet, it is important to emphasise that the bioregional project today, after decades of globalisation, necessarily thrives on the free circulation of people and ideas and will require a global movement of politically connected regions (SDT 2011).

Finity and habitability

Imagining material autonomy for cities opens urban scenarios of stability (not growth) and puts reduction and sufficiency at the core of urban politics. In other words, it is impossible to achieve both autonomy and growth. The project of autonomy engenders finity, a socio-spatial regulation and a system of institutional organisation founded on universal minimum standards and universal obligations, and more – as detailed in Xue (2021). Examples of finity include regulations limiting sprawl, visitors, build volumes, energy use, emissions and waste. Decades of state neo-liberalisation have created a political culture that sees regulations as excessive, impossible, illegitimate, unfair (for private initiatives) and counterproductive. However, many cities commonly regulate the height of buildings, obligate developers to limit biodiversity loss, or increase the share of reusable materials. These are the lowest-hanging fruits of a spatial planning for degrowth. Limiting unwanted uses allows public resources (first of all, land) to be obtained for investments in services. A spatial agenda for degrowth encourages urban development that pursues limits while enabling social justice.

The concepts of autonomy and finity seek to re-make cities into more habitable places where well-being thrives without the imperative to generate economic value from land properties. They reject the modern compulsion to growth that has turned large human settlements into dead zones. The inner areas of cities such as Beijing, Kolkata, Mumbai, Paris and Brussels are among the most polluted areas of the planet. Planners have put economic performance, particularly for human mobility, at the centre of their operations while crucial matters such as clean air, healthy food, birds, insects, bacteria and fertile soil remained secondary, mere items within datasheets of environmental impact assessments (Von Schönfeld and Ferreira 2023). If the global economy collapsed, mass starvation, pandemics and conflict would erupt in these densely populated environments.

Habitability describes a particular territory's capacity to guarantee the survival of the organisms living in it. As a planning principle, habitability centres bio-physical regeneration, conservation and nature in urban politics. It is a new worldview that moves beyond established anthropocentric planning worldviews that see cities as self-created homes for humans (Schuurman 2024). It questions geo-political separation and inequalities between urban and rural areas. Urban design, landscape studies and planning must take an ecological and regenerative turn towards a post-humanist planning approach that will ultimately improve the material living conditions of urban dwellers. Such a planning approach entails a whole palette of interventions, not all of which are grassroots-based. It affects spatial planning at different scales and in different sectors, from housing to material provision, and requires a radically different ethic of planning (Table 31.1).

Spatial planning and the challenge of legitimacy

Any spatial planning for degrowth – the practice of organising collective action towards a common vision of socio-spatial organisation – must first build the necessary politics. Planning has historically reflected specific power articulations and ideologies (Shepherd et al. 2020), with contemporary planning mirroring a growth-led, techno-fetishist ideology rooted in the eco-modern tradition (even when it includes clear struggles for justice) (Raco and Savini 2019). Spatial planning is itself a field of power struggle over specific visions of the future and the instruments and strategies to reach them (Savini 2024).

The core issue for planning is not organisation (at least not at first) but legitimacy. In other words, democratic planning schemes for transitioning to a sufficiency-based economy currently lack public legitimacy or too often remain little more than words on paper. Spatial planning should

Table 31.1 Manifesto of the Postgrowth Cities Coalition. Sourced from PCC (undated).

Manifesto With our eyes fixed on a postgrowth world, we must promote:
Housing Residential buildings that no longer contribute to environmental destruction, but instead catalyse human and ecological flourishing by building communities and reducing resource and energy consumption
Mobility Transport systems that are no longer produced by environmentally destructive machines but instead prioritise ecological and social sustainability, granting people access to healthy food, care and meaningful social engagement
Government Institutions that no longer fetishise private property as a right but pursue forms of autonomy and democracy that centre essential needs, such as social care, health, meaningful social engagement and human well-being
Regulation Planning laws that no longer promote ever-increasing land values but recognise land's social value and promote regeneration within ecological limits
Metabolism Tools that stop producing carbon, pollution and waste but instead foster human health, regenerate ecologies and community integration
Planning ethic A societal work ethic that eschews competition and individualism to promote mutual understanding, trust and compassion, thereby allowing all communities affected by planning decisions to honestly engage with one another.

build legitimacy around a degrowth set of interventions, an agenda, rather than simply divide tasks between civic, market and government actors for agendas that the masses of people hardly want. The numerous available degrowth policy proposals (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022) will never be realised if the masses understand the goals of sufficiency, reduction and slowing as alien or counter-productive to their material pursuits and personal values (Meissner 2021; Paulson 2017). As long as urban dwellers, their governments and entrepreneurs perceive cities as mere spaces of consumption, there will be no legitimacy to undertake democratic processes for reduction, habitability or autonomy. Therefore, building legitimacy for a degrowth transition is crucial, and urban areas – dense agglomerates of diverse people – are essential sites for this struggle.

Indeed, cities already host initiatives that embody degrowth values and a degrowth culture. These prefigurative initiatives are supported by networks of mutual support. Planning should leverage the synergy between these prefigurative practices and, in so doing, convert them into a degrowth movement that will apply pressure on state institutions, as in Barlow et al. (2022). Prefiguration enables the everyday practice of degrowth, creating sites where degrowth values can be nurtured in, for example, housing cooperatives, squats, urban agroecology and cycling. Yet, prefiguration alone is not enough. As Williams (1980, p. 138) puts it:

> there is a simple theoretical distinction between alternative and oppositional, that is to say between someone who simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it, and someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light.

Prefiguration must be followed by what Meissner (2021) calls the popularisation of degrowth values. Popularisation occurs when, for example, housing cooperatives are seen as a viable alternative by those who do not or cannot live in them. It also occurs when prefigurative practices of organic waste reuse are admired by those who do not or cannot compost their own waste, or by car drivers

who envy cyclists on their commute. In other words, popularisation is the currency of ideological change – it occurs when the values prefigured by some become the public commonsense. Popularisation is essential for building movements that pressure state institutions. Social movements pressure existing institutions, fostering counter-hegemonic seeds of a new ideology that can reshape institutions and governments.

Spatial planning triggers popularisation from prefiguration and then leverages that popularisation to generate pressure and create a critical political mass to demand radical institutional changes. This view of change is open to a wider range of strategies, procedures and tactics than those envisioned in most degrowth studies (which too often celebrate the local and the small). The notion of pressure accepts pathways to degrowth through state politics, but in a way that it is clearly rooted in prefigurative practices locally, often self-organised. For example, neighbourhood-based citizen assemblies are only effective when they are already recognised as legitimate by civic and public actors (which may fund or simply provide spaces for those assemblies); they may be ineffective or even counterproductive if the political backing for their operation is not yet recognised.

To apply pressure, planning should build on the many prefigurative degrowth practices already extant in cities – practices that perform everyday habitability, finity and autonomy but have not coalesced into an urban degrowth movement. The first task of a degrowth planning process, of the degrowth spatial planner (Lamker and Dieckhoff 2022), would be to create a degrowth narrative or vision that gives meaning to a pluriverse of practices within a transformative pathway towards degrowth. This task is both discursive and institutional, involving both visionary narratives of urban futures and the formation of political organisations to coordinate this effort.

Examples of degrowth spatial planning are as scarce as (inter)national degrowth policy programs. Yet, the value of targeting urbanisation in degrowth spatial planning is evidenced by the fact that cities (more than anywhere else) have a degree of pre-existing organised post-growth practice (Crisp et al. 2023; De Castro Mazarro et al. 2023; Fudge et al. 2021). Degrowth has long been rooted in critiques of the urban condition and in early visions of bioregionalism. All over the world, we see specific urban areas adopting urban imaginaries of habitability, agroecology and well-being alongside movements pressuring governments to tackle over-tourism, housing commodification, evictions, and car use. Perhaps these movements are beginning to popularise degrowth practices that have been present on the ground for years. However, this popularisation must coalesce into political pressure on state institutions to decommodify urban services, de-privatise land, invest in universal essential amenities and the revitalisation of rural hinterlands, and, in so doing, overturn the urban growth cycle.

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32

DEGROWTH-ALIGNED COMMONING ORGANISATIONS

Ben Robra, Sabrina Chakori and Chris Giotitsas

Introduction

Climate change and ecological degradation is accelerating at an alarming rate (Richardson et al. 2023), representing one of the greatest challenges to societies to date. Degrowth has emerged both as a movement and as an academic field of scholarly enquiry to help achieve sustainable futures (Liegey and Nelson 2020). Both the movement and the scholarship boast a plethora of influences, ranging from thermodynamics to environmental justice, autonomy and conviviality. As such, degrowth is diverse, taking many shapes and forms. Schmelzer et al. (2022) identify various streams within degrowth scholarship with diverse interpretations and definitions. However, the key denominator within these perspectives is the recognition that climate change and ecological degradation are the result of the continued pursuit of economic growth. As such, degrowth first and foremost represents a growth critique.

Economic growth requires continued increases in consumption of resources and energy. Endless economic growth is impossible on a finite planet. Degrowth argues for the need to reduce matter-energy throughput in order to avoid ecological collapse (Cosme et al. 2017; Robra and Heikkurinen 2021; Schneider et al. 2010). Simultaneously, degrowth has the ambition to create an equitable society in which everyone can flourish. Degrowth emphasises conviviality, well-being, environmental social justice and the good life for all at its core.

The pursuit of economic growth continues to create and exacerbate global social and environmental inequality. Yet, despite its ecological and social ramifications, the pursuit of economic growth as a socio-economic goal largely persists in society (Dale 2012). Further, the majority of contemporary structures in society are entangled and based on continued economic growth. Büchs and Koch (2019), for example, highlight how even Western models of welfare systems are largely reliant on continued growth to function. Degrowth, therefore, represents the envisioning of a society not based on economic growth but rather on social provisioning in tune with ecological cycles and limits, conviviality, autonomy, enjoyment of life, meaningful activities and emancipation. In line with this, degrowth entails a fundamental transformation of society's goals, values and structures.

In order to transform society away from its focus on economic growth, degrowth must overcome capitalist and productivist structures (Akbulut 2021; Löwy et al. 2022; Schmelzer et al.

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2022). Capitalism, in this context, is understood as a social formation in which capital accumulation and valorisation is seen as the main goal for economic activity. Economic growth is constantly necessary to enable further capital accumulation, without which capitalism falls into crisis (Foster et al. 2010). We similarly interpret degrowth as having to overcome capitalism, including its structures, culture and ideology; essentially replacing them with a whole range of new structures, values, principles and institutions. This perspective emphasises that degrowth requires the replacement of the dominant social formation and its mode of production. Further, it holds particular significance in the context of business and organisations.

Capitalist forms of organisation such as businesses and corporations are generally expected to create profits and grow (Banerjee et al. 2021). This pursuit of profit is essentially what creates capital accumulation, which creates economic growth, which in turn enables further opportunities for capital accumulation. Simply put, this means that capitalist forms of organising economic activity are inherently incompatible with degrowth. First, this has stark implications for what types of organisations can potentially fit with degrowth. In other words, organisations that follow capitalist objectives will not be fit for degrowth. Instead, degrowth compatible organisations have to follow a different set of goals and purposes. Second, this has implications for a degrowth transformation itself. Businesses and other forms of organisation are society's producers. They heavily influence how economic activity is organised. Capitalist forms of organisation help reproduce capitalist structures and imperatives. For degrowth, this emphasises the need to understand alternative forms of organisation not aligned with the capitalist mode of production. It is particularly essential to understand how these organisations might help to transform society's structures.

Despite organisations representing a key facet of any economy in terms of producing and providing services, within degrowth scholarship organisations have generally found little attention. Particularly in degrowth's main literature, where organisations are often solely seen as producers fitting within proposed macroeconomic proposals. In other words, organisations are not seen as having any form of agency in terms of shaping society and its mode of production. To help address this shortcoming, we present *commoning* as an alternative form of organisation that can easily be aligned with degrowth underpinnings.

Commons describe collectively shared, and crucially, community-managed resources (Ostrom 1990). Through a common, a community can sustainably manage resource access, ensuring it will not be overused and depleted. The commons represent a different form of property in contrast to private and state property. Indeed, managing resources through commoning has existed in various forms in human society long before the introduction of private property rights. Past commons across Europe were systematically destroyed to ensure emerging capital accumulation through the holding of private property. Additionally, commons have been misconceptualised as a failure to manage resources sustainably. Hardin (1968) infamously coined the idea of 'the tragedy of the commons'. His argument was that commons would eventually lead to resource exhaustion as people would use resources as much as possible for personal gain, hence emphasising the need for private property. However, all that Hardin described was essentially the potential problem of open access to a resource without proper governance and management (Araral 2014).

Commons have survived across the globe, albeit in niches (Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Further, the commons have found renewed attention as a sustainable way to manage resources. The broad introduction of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the form of digital commons has further spiked scholarly and practitioner attention (Benkler 2007). Digital commons are immaterial resources like software, design files and knowledge required to develop tools and objects under non-restrictive licences. Digital commons are enmeshed with the natural and cultural commons through the process of commoning. Commoning, understood as the social

practice to produce and manage commons, has been 'rediscovered' as a form of organising in contrast to capitalist norms (Bollier and Helfrich 2015, 2019). The practice of commoning is seen as a challenge to the capitalist private property regime and a way to reconceptualise economic activity in line with needs rather than profit-making. Commoning and commons have been connected to degrowth (Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Chakori and Hopkinson 2024; Kostakis et al. 2018).

This chapter provides a framing of commoning for degrowth, starting with a brief description of two indicative cases of commoning organisations aligned with degrowth – an energy community in northern Greece and a tool library in Australia. Lessons are drawn from both cases and the chapter closes with some practical and theoretical implications for degrowth scholarship.

Capitalism, business and degrowth

Friedman (1970) (in)famously argued that the sole social responsibility of businesses is to continuously grow their profits. Similar to the persistence of the notion that the pursuit of economic growth is essential for prosperity (Dale 2012; Jackson 2011), the mantra that businesses are mainly seen as having to create profits and growth continues to be the norm (Banerjee et al. 2021). Under capitalist logic, the pursuit and maximisation of profits make perfect sense. Profits represent capital accumulation and valorisation through economic activity. The increase in capital enables further economic activity. An increase in economic activity, economic growth, enables further capital accumulation. Hence, without continued growth the potential to accumulate capital, the core of capitalism, decreases, putting the system into crisis. Under this system, it makes sense for businesses to first and foremost pursue profits, as it keeps the capitalist machine going. Businesses following capitalist objectives help reproduce the structures and ideology of the capitalist system. It is not surprising that the pursuit for profit is not only seen as a responsibility, as Friedman put it, but enshrined in the legal structures of capitalist business.

The extent to which the mantra of profits, growth and accumulation is enshrined and becoming more intense in the capitalist business logic can be illustrated through so-called start-up ecosystems. Capitalist-driven start-up incubators educate people to start businesses (often just by flirting with an idea of a product or service to deliver), raise capital (such as via public investments) and implement an 'exit strategy' to sell the entity to maximise capital returns. In this venture capital funding model, exit strategies enable funders and founders to cash out their investments, often with enormous returns (Lemley and McCreary 2021). This is particularly true for successful start-ups, which exit by selling or merging with bigger companies. This model shows that the economic objective is not to contribute to society by producing (needed) goods and services but solely to valorise and accumulate capital. The ultimate purpose of these businesses from the investors' point of view is to exit the venture for quick financial gain (Pisoni and Onetti 2018). According to Pisoni and Onetti (2018, p. 28) '[t]he exit represents a financial harvest strategy'. What the authors refer to here as 'a financial harvest strategy' essentially represents a process of capital valorisation and accumulation.

Lemley and McCreary (2021, p. 1) state, referring to Silicon Valley models, that 'the most important thing to think about when starting a company is how you're going to end it'. The objective is to accumulate and circulate capital. In the start-up world, exit strategies are the ultimate success story. Within capitalist business logic, the goal is to find ever new ways to valorise and accumulate capital, even if this means decoupling the business activity from any meaningful economic activity that could contribute to society. Even though this illustration might seem like a capitalist extreme, start-up incubation has become a norm supported by government policy

and universities. In essence, it pointedly highlights the general capitalist logic that Marx (1969) described with *M-C-M'*.

For degrowth scholarship, it is crucial to understand this capitalist business logic and ideology when researching organisations. It re-emphasises that capitalist businesses are inherently incompatible with any degrowth vision. It is, therefore, concerning that degrowth literature tends to relegate organisations solely to provisioners (Robra and Hinton 2024). Further, the little attention organisations find in degrowth literature tends to focus on single cases and how they align with degrowth (see the review by Froese et al. (2023) of existing case studies). There is a tendency to view these organisations in isolation, discounting the wider capitalist political economy, which highlights a lack of acknowledgement of the potential role of organisations in helping degrowth overcome capitalist structures. Additionally, some existing research portrays a potential compatibility between degrowth and capitalist objectives. Roulet and Bothello (2020), for example, argue that degrowth could be used by businesses as a competitive advantage. Others, such as Khmara and Kronenberg (2018, p. 723), connect capitalist business concepts with degrowth, for example stating that '[i]t should be noted that it is not required that a degrowth company not generate profits. Quite the opposite, profits are necessary for the existence of a company'. This approach not only blurs the lines between degrowth and capitalism but further represents a co-optation of degrowth for capitalist purposes, be that intentional or unintentional – and helps reproduce capitalist structures rather than helping achieve degrowth futures (Robra and Hinton 2024).

We argue for understanding organisations in more depth and, crucially, for a focus on alternative forms of organisations that have the potential to be non-capitalist and align with degrowth values and objectives. Additionally, instead of viewing organisations in isolation, it needs to be understood how degrowth-aligned organisations might help a degrowth transformation beyond organisational boundaries. Regarding anti-capitalist strategies, Erik Olin Wright's (2021) work has increasingly been adopted by degrowth scholars to explore how a degrowth transformation could be achieved (Chertkovskaya 2022; Herbert et al. 2021). Chertkovskaya (2022, p. 57) describes Wright's modes of transformation as follows:

> *Ruptural transformations* seek a direct confrontation or break with existing institutions and social structures. *Interstitial transformations* involve building new forms of social empowerment on the margins of capitalist society, usually outside of spaces dominated by those in power. *Symbiotic transformations*, in turn, are aimed at changing the existing institutions and growing power within the current system so as to ultimately transform it. (Italics in original)

It is important to note that Wright (2021) dismisses interstitial transformation, such as building alternatives in the niches and margins, as escapism from capitalism that fails to challenge capitalist structures at large. Much of the existing research on degrowth and organisations focuses solely on this interstitial transformation.

Chertkovskaya (2022) makes the case that it is essential to understand that the three modes of transformation have to work in conjunction if a degrowth transformation is to be successful. In this sense, building alternative forms of organising economic activity (interstitial transformation) represents a valid strategy to transcend capitalist structures if combined with forcing structural change through, for example, policies (symbiotic transformation). Similarly, taking over a factory can be regarded as ruptural transformation (Chertkovskaya 2022), which then can be transformed to align with degrowth practices (interstitial transformation). Overall, degrowth-aligned alternative forms of organisation need to be political in the sense that they do not seek to simply escape capitalism

but rather to transcend it and force structural change. In this sense, Hinton (2020) argues for the need for organisations to help create or reproduce a not-for-profit economy. Similarly, Robra et al. (2021) emphasise that organisations aligning with degrowth must consciously seek to help establish a degrowth society.

Commoning as organisational practice for degrowth

Different forms of alternative organisations have been proposed to fit with degrowth principles. A number of scholars highlight various different types of cooperatives (Blauwhof 2012; Colombo et al. 2023; Homs et al. 2021; Johanisova et al. 2015). Generally, the connection to degrowth is made through the affinity and potential of cooperatives to be worker-led, not-for-profit oriented, and community centred and focused. Similarly, social enterprises have been described as potentially fitting degrowth through their affinity with a focus on the social good (Hankammer et al. 2021; Houtbeckers 2018; Johanisova et al. 2013; Sekulova et al. 2013). Yet, both of these alternative forms of organisations are prone to operate in for-profit and growth-oriented ways, or can easily be co-opted for these purposes. An alternative form of organising is required that can challenge capitalism at its core. Commons-based peer production (CBPP) organisations are particularly interesting in this context as they operate through commoning (Kostakis et al. 2018; Robra et al. 2020).

Given that commoning describes the practice of managing, governing and creating commons, commoning can be regarded as an organising practice that goes beyond the common as simply a resource. As such as an organising practise, commoning can be applied to a plethora of economic and social activities. Bollier and Helfrich (2019) define commoning through three interconnected spheres, namely social practice, provisioning and peer governance. Social practice in the context of commoning emphasises relations based on sharing and cooperation. Sharing can refer to knowledge and resources alike – in stark contrast to the individualistic and competitive mindset dominant in capitalism. Provisioning through commoning refers to producing and providing services to meet needs, rather than catering to ever-increasing wants created through marketing. Peer governance refers to democratic governance that is neither top-down nor participatory decision-making but governing through embedded relationships. Overall, the three spheres of commoning represent practices in contrast to, and potentially transcending, capitalism. Commoning is an economic practice and form of organising that represents a challenge to the dominant capitalist way of organising for-profit, growth, and capital accumulation. For degrowth, it represents economic practice and organising neither prone to nor reliant on economic growth and accumulation (Helfrich and Bollier 2015). Commoning highlights a way of organising economic activity that can potentially help degrowth to overcome capitalism.

By seeking to provide for needs while emphasising sharing and cooperation, commoning represents a clear alternative to capitalist objectives. Organisations that operate through commoning have the potential to 'produce use value which satisfies directly specific needs and wants, rather than exchange value, that is, the value of commodities in market exchanges through which profit can be made' (Kioupkiolis 2022, p. 57). This focus on use value and social provisioning connects to Illich's (2001) concept of conviviality, which is often used to describe types of technology and innovation potentially fitting degrowth (Robra et al. 2023; Vetter 2018). In this context, conviviality is typically used to describe how technology needs to be adaptable, appropriate and accessible to help satisfy needs sustainably in various settings and situations – and to organise economic activity autonomously with a focus on social provisioning at various scales (Vetter and Fersterer,

Chapter 14, this volume). To align with degrowth, commoning needs to be convivial – conviviality as subsumed under commoning practices aligned with degrowth.

So, CBPP is considered to easily fit with degrowth – offering the possibility to organise economic activity without profit incentives and growth (Kostakis et al. 2018). While CBPP can operate without the drive to maximise profits, accumulate capital and create economic growth, commoning organisations might not be immune to economic growth nor indeed capitalist objectives. Kostakis et al. (2018) describe a growth-neutrality within CBPP. CBPP organisations can potentially seek to make profits and accumulate – a likely survival strategy within capitalist society (Robra et al. 2020, 2021). Further, knowledge and artefacts produced through commoning have been utilised and co-opted by capitalist firms to help accumulate capital and ultimately lead to economic growth (Kostakis 2018; Pazaitis and Kostakis 2021). Commoning is not a silver bullet to achieve degrowth. However, in contrast to cooperatives and social enterprises, commoning represents a stronger challenge to capitalism as it operates using a different mode of production by definition. Cooperatives can operate using commoning; however, commoning represents a stronger potential to align economic activity with degrowth. Additionally, Robra et al. (2021) highlight that CBPP organisations which strongly align with degrowth principles do so consciously rather than solely through commoning practices alone.

Albeit not a silver bullet, commoning represents a good way for organisations to align economic activity with degrowth objectives. Commoning practices in organisations help the degrowth movement to build alternatives in the here and now, and represent a potential form of interstitial transformation. Like other forms of alternative organisations, the sole act of commoning or organising economic activity through commoning does not represent a transcendence of capitalism and change of societal structures. Indeed, using digital commons as an example, Kioupkiolis (2022) argues that commoning initiatives need to become part of a fully fledged political alliance or movement seeking to overcome capitalism.

To explore degrowth in practice, beyond theoretical advancements, the next two sections describe two commoning organisations to highlight how these organisations align with degrowth objectives through commoning and beyond, and how they seek to influence societal structures beyond the organisations themselves. In the discussion, we outline the main challenges and opportunities faced by these degrowth-aligned organisations.

Brisbane tool library

Tool libraries have become widespread and exist in a number of countries. From Iceland to New Zealand, from Chile to Australia, these community-based organisations enable people to borrow tools, camping gear and other equipment (Chakori and Hopkinson 2021). Tool libraries function like book libraries, but, instead of books, people can borrow a plethora of things ranging from tools such as lawnmowers to hiking equipment such as tents. Different reasons and needs push individuals and communities to start tool libraries. Passionate do-it-yourself (DIY) lovers might start these organisations to create spaces of sharing and making, others as a way to break loneliness and recreate community, and some as a response to tackle waste-related challenges or overconsumption and productivism. The Brisbane Tool Library (BTL) based in Australia was founded in 2017 to help achieve necessary reductions in energy and resource use through sharing tools as a community rather than fostering the resource-intensive private ownership model.

BTL's practices and activities are enabled through various commoning approaches. First, BTL practices commoning through the sharing of items fostering a borrowing model. In this regard,

the items themselves are the commons in which access over ownership is prioritised (Chakori and Hopkinson 2021, 2024). In BTL's case, commoning does not translate simply to having shared assets such as tools. Commoning is understood and practised as an agreed upon plan within the community in which the resources and skills are shared – commoning represents a social practice. Additionally, BTL shapes and adapts the inventory and services based on community needs. This example of commoning aligns with provisioning for needs. By responding to community needs, BTL works towards the reduction of resource use, a core aspect of degrowth (Schneider et al. 2010). BTL's aim to help downscale socio-ecological metabolism was consciously chosen by its initiators to align with degrowth. The organisation, therefore, presents a window into how degrowth can be practised.

Since its founding (March, 2017), BTL enabled more than 12,000 loans as of January 2023. This corresponds to saving the community approximately AU$1m otherwise spent if BTL's members had purchased tools for private use and ownership. Although difficult to prove (more quantitative research in this domain is required), it seems reasonable to assume that sharing represents energy and resource savings, and perhaps even reduced production and demand for the items in question. These achievements are particularly significant as BTL was closed for most of the COVID-19 pandemic period and open on average just two days a week since its inception due to several external constraints (Chakori and Hopkinson 2024). BTL's active membership (people who pay and borrow items) has fluctuated between 150 and 500 members indicating the potential economic and ecological savings if such tool libraries were widespread within cities.

Consciousness raising

BTL (2024) makes its degrowth goals explicit and shares them with the public:

> By collecting and building an inventory based on second-hand items, [Brisbane Tool Library] intensifies and maximises their use-value through co-use. . . . It contributes to a larger degrowth movement that aims at an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term. By bringing people together to share resources and skills, the Brisbane Tool Library aims at modelling a circular economy based on the commons.

This explicit degrowth alignment is, unlike many other tool libraries and repair cafés, present and central to the core work of the organisation. BTL's work goes beyond simple 'repairing' capitalist discards, such as e-waste. It links its objectives and work to the wider degrowth movement and its aim of socio-economic-political change. Hence, BTL argues that its 'community-driven circular economy challenges the unsustainable growth-driven system and becomes a way to build a web of social relations fostering different ways of valuing and sharing the world around us' (BTL 2024). BTL embraces its political role to help enable a degrowth transition, which manifests in BTL's narrative that does not limit itself to waste-reduction. Waste reduction is a common organisational goal in regard to sustainability. These efforts are usually co-opted by the growth-driven 'circular economy' (Chakori et al. 2022; Chakori and Hopkinson 2021).

If solely focusing on waste reduction there is a lack of engaging with the wider problematic structures embedded in capitalism, such as productivism, the alienated and fetishised social

relations, and reliance on exchange-value as a way for money to make more money (Chakori and Hopkinson 2024). Additionally, focusing on waste as the main sustainability issue shifts the burden to consumers or deals simply with post-consumption repair or recycling. Tackling waste-related issues without engaging with capitalists' mechanisms that create waste, such as planned obsolescence, advertising and socially pressuring marketing, will limit and undermine action towards wider systemic change. Therefore, by embedding local actions into a broader degrowth transition pathway, BTL encourages attention to the problematic productivist and consumerist dynamics existing in capitalist society.

Sharing ideas can maximise impact more than simply limiting actions to sharing tools. Therefore, part of BTL's mission is to engage with the community in workshops and other events to unpack and democratise the understanding of the economic system. Through active participation, BTL provides an educational component to its lending tool services. Talks, documentary screenings, manual workshops and several guest presentations contribute to educating communities on the root causes that ultimately lead to excessive resource use and waste production, opening up discussions about social and ecological well-being values, visions and structures to achieve them.

Not for profit

All BTL practices are encapsulated into a not-for-profit organisation model. Not-for-profit legal structures are central to degrowth (Hinton 2021). BTL adopted a not-for-profit status to prioritise social and ecological goals. BTL's team has always aimed at practising decentralised and horizontal governance (Chakori and Hopkinson 2024), with all the challenges and opportunities of unlearning and learning peer governance in commoning practices (Bollier and Helfrich 2019). BTL builds circularity based on the commons, circulating power and decision-making within the community it serves and the team involved.

BTL's model unlocks an alternative political reality, where private ownership can be transcended for a greater, common, good. In fact, by borrowing, communities can potentially reduce their ecological footprint and individuals can save money (by not buying new items) and space at home (by not having to stock under-utilised items). This case study shows how the BTL embedded degrowth and applied it within the possibilities of the current system while raising participants' consciousness of degrowth analyses, principles and objectives.

Challenges

Despite BTL's ability to practice degrowth through commoning, BTL faces challenges. Internal challenges are understood as, for example, lack of skills, team management issues or problems in maintaining the inventory, but BTL rarely faces these situations. External challenges are understood as challenges created by the broader socio-economic system in which BTL exists and operates. Over the years, BTL faced mainly external pressures, such as a lack of access to affordable land to operate from (due to, for example, gentrification), or challenges in finding spare parts to repair items (due to tool manufacturers either limiting repairability or ceasing production of parts as soon as new models were introduced). So far, BTL coped with the lack of space to operate from by having partnerships with Queensland's State Government which, for example, provided a space within the public library (State Library of Queensland, SLQ) from 2018 to 2022. However, before and after BTL's partnership with SLQ, BTL had to interrupt its operations on various occasions due to relocation and other space-related challenges.

CommonEn

'Energy community' is a malleable term used to describe organisations engaged in some form of energy-related activity oriented around a community. This can range from large-scale cooperatives producing and managing electricity for a profit, similar enterprises doing the same but with a focus on democratising the sector, to grassroots initiatives aiming to produce energy locally and sustainably on a needs-based foundation. Here we focus on CommonEn, a Greek energy community founded in 2021, which falls on the latter end of the spectrum.

While energy matters are of major importance in degrowth (Tsagkari et al. 2021), surprisingly, there is limited insight on how energy consumption can be reduced organisationally in a degrowth context. Energy infrastructure and technology have gained little to no attention within degrowth scholarship (Dunlap 2023), although see Tsagkari et al. (Chapter 10, this volume). CommonEn was created to explore ways to achieve reductions in energy consumption and demand following the principles of open cooperativism and commoning by reconceptualising energy as a communal resource rather than as a commodity.

By mid-2024 CommonEn had created two small-scale solar photovoltaic (PV) parks – one on top of a manufacturing facility, and the second on a sloping field unsuitable for agricultural cultivation – to cover the needs of about 60 households (including donating electricity to a vulnerable household) and 6 small local businesses. More such projects are in development. The organisation is implementing a demand-side flexibility scheme amongst its members to better adapt to the limits of energy produced by its existing infrastructure. CommonEn is creating a community urban agrophotovoltaic installation (a transparent PV installation which functions as a greenhouse for a community garden) in the city of Ioannina, the first of its kind in Greece. Regarding future projects, the organisation is exploring the potential of repurposing numerous abandoned heritage watermills of the region to produce electricity for village communities in the mills' vicinities. Considering how the legal framework, financial tools and political forces in the country (most countries in fact) are unsuitable, if not outright hostile, to the schemes of not-for-profit organisations, these are significant achievements.

These achievements and proposals are, in part, due to the tenacity of members to contribute to real alternatives to current socially and environmentally unsustainable capitalist practices. Beyond practical activities, the CommonEn community engages in a plethora of outreach and education activities, including manufacturing workshops for small-scale, open-source wind- and hydro-power turbines. This highlights the potential of energy alternatives in opposition to state-sponsored fossil fuel extraction plans in the wider Epirus region, which is home to pristine natural ecosystems.

Decision-making and responsibilities

Commoning practices are at the heart of all activities undertaken by the CommonEn community. Decision-making is done in a horizontal manner, with members being as active in deliberation processes as possible. Measures are taken to enable participation, for example, assigning a childminder for members with children or having enhanced online deliberations. Energy produced by the organisation's solar parks is managed as a commons with members calculating their energy needs and procuring a percentage of a project as a share. They also adjust their individual consumption patterns whilst developing the infrastructure to do so at a communal level. They adjust their use to each other's patterns, and to when the parks produce most, for example around noon. Flexibility in the consumption side allows for better alignment with current production capacities, thus reducing the need for ever-increasing peak capacity in grids. Energy communities allow for much better coordination of consumption by exposing themselves to the intricacies

of a by-definition limited energy pool as well as being mindful of their relevant behaviours as a group. Their inter-community coordination not only reduces the actual energy they consume but also develops a culture of prioritising actual energy needs instead of ever-increasing consumption.

Degrowth ethos: small scale and cultural

While for many members of the growing community the word 'degrowth' means little to nothing, degrowth is a core motivator for the instigators of the organisation. As such, CommonEn (2021) has communicated the project in a way which incorporates the principles of degrowth, whilst addressing the energy concerns of local populations:

Its purpose is the production and management of clean and affordable energy to achieve the following goals:

- To promote energy democracy and the social and solidarity economy in the energy sector.
- To contribute to de-escalating the continuously increasing energy production and use of raw materials while simultaneously upgrading social and environmental well-being.
- To tackle energy poverty.
- To make sustainable use of local energy resources to meet the needs of the societies of Epirus.

The instigators' degrowth ethos is clearly articulated here and in their various activities. Energy democracy in the form of enhanced citizen engagement is key for success in any kind of degrowth future. The organisational configuration of energy communities may prove to be at the centre of such a transition. Similarly, prioritising localisation of energy production and developing relevant infrastructure become priorities for energy communities comprised of citizens more concerned with the well-being of their surrounding ecosystems and communities than in capitalist firms maximising profit through ever-increasing production.

CommonEn aims to develop technological capacities for energy systems geared towards sustainability in a small-scale, decentralised and localised framework. This is in direct opposition to national governments that treat green energy transition as an opportunity for rampant development of renewable infrastructure, ignoring environmental considerations or questioning the actual energy needs of the country. Instead, the community aspires to provide a living example of what an alternative energy system may look like, in terms of both organisation and infrastructure.

More crucially, CommonEn wishes to collaboratively explore how a cultural shift can be achieved – away from the dominant perception of energy produced continuously as a commodity despite biophysical limits and externalities resulting from the constant expansion of energy production. This shift is of utmost importance as the current perception, coupled with the promise of green energy and technological efficiency, arguably contributes to ever-increasing energy consumption patterns in many societies. By including citizens in the contingency-laden steps required before plugging an electrical device into the power socket, CommonEn seeks to develop better understandings of the entailed costs of modern energy consumption. Through this, the organisation seeks to contribute to developing a different ethos around what constitutes energy necessity and how a better life can be achieved whilst consuming less.

Challenges

Similarly to BTL, CommonEn faces the typical hurdles of coordinating a group of people through a highly technical and legally complex endeavour. This is made more challenging by the

ever-changing legislative framework of Greece regarding energy communities. This is largely due to the inability or lack of interest to comprehend the huge potential and peculiarities of energy communities. This leads to energy communities being treated as for-profit, large-scale private renewables projects, which presents several financing and administrative challenges. Recent shifts in the legal framework have forced CommonEn to change its legal status, the resulting implications yet to be clarified by the government. To achieve more favourable conditions, CommonEn has joined forces with other like-minded communities to create a coalition for a stronger political front, which has forced government officials to at least recognise oversights and engage in dialogue to improve the situation.

Discussion

Both cases clearly show alignment with degrowth through their activities and practices. The organisations' activities generally fit within the core aim of degrowth to reduce matter-energy throughput, a potential alignment analysed in a number of cases over the past decade (Froese et al. 2023). A key difference to previous studies is that both CommonEn and BTL align with degrowth through their core activity; essentially their modus operandi represent degrowth concepts in practice (as do other chapters in Part III, this volume). This is particularly evident as both BTL and CommonEn operate through commoning, adopting this as a conscious way to organise their activities in stark contrast to economic activity aligned with the dominant capitalist mode of production.

BTL seeks to prioritise access over ownership to reduce potential inequalities (Chakori and Hopkinson 2021). People can gain access to items and experiences, such as camping or DIY activities, otherwise limited just to those with means to purchase the necessary tools outright. However, even more crucially, BTL prioritises community needs over core capitalist concepts, such as private ownership and status goods. BTL has structured its entire organisation through commoning. CommonEn attempts to de-commodify energy by reconceptualising it as a community resource, or commons, the production and consumption of which requires careful balancing of individual needs and the collective good, and respecting ecological limits. This is in stark contrast to capitalist imperatives in energy production and markets where decision-making even in energy transitions is profit driven, and only superficially addresses sustainability concerns. By treating energy as a commons, more radical and, at the same time, nuanced and inclusive solutions to the energy conundrum come to the fore. Further, to enable energy as a commons, CommonEn's organisational structure is built on commoning itself.

Commoning in line with degrowth, as exemplified by BTL and CommonEn, is possible and strengthened through conviviality. Conviviality enables a constant relationship, feedback and reiteration between people involved in the organisations, ensuring appropriateness of structures as well as tools. In the case of BTL, conviviality is not only embodied by the ways volunteers organise the workload and decision-making processes – prioritising democratic governance, de-emphasising workload stress, applying empathy and generally taking care of each other – but conviviality is also applied in relationship to borrowers. More specifically, BTL responds to community requests and needs by adapting its inventory, such as seeking additional needed items and/or removing unused ones. In BTL's case, convivial relationships provide a critical input that influences the materiality of the project, such as the inventory and related logistical processes. CommonEn exemplifies a high degree of conviviality in terms of maximising benefit rather than profit and, despite technical and legal barriers, it aims to potentially facilitate a broader restructuring of energy for sustainability in a small-scale, decentralised and a localised manner, thus further embodying conviviality.

Conviviality is a characteristic of both organisations – vital as an active feedback loop which helps maintain their democratic approaches and responsiveness to community needs. Additionally, contrary to simply 'consuming' the services of these organisations (as is normal in the capitalist modus operandi), *belonging* is an important aspect to advance and maintain conviviality.

Both organisations, albeit mainly through their initiators, consciously sought to align with degrowth from their inception, an alignment that extends and seeps out into the organisations' structures and modus operandi. In line with the findings of Robra et al. (2021), this conscious alignment allows both organisations to contribute to societal changes that go beyond their own organisational boundaries. Crucially, both BTL and CommonEn understand their degrowth alignment to go beyond matter-energy reduction to embrace other degrowth principles. Both organisations regard themselves as political agents for degrowth. Hence, both not only exhibit, in Wright's (2021) terminology, interstitial but also symbiotic transformation. In other words, CommonEn and BTL demonstrate economic activity in line with degrowth, while simultaneously pushing for wider societal changes to help make such economic activities more attainable in wider settings. The necessity for such political degrowth alignment is usually lacking from research on degrowth and organisation (Robra and Hinton 2024). It is crucial to point out that BTL's and CommonEn's political alignment with degrowth is connected to commoning as an alternative economic practice opposed to capitalism. Whether CommonEn's and BTL's political degrowth alignment emerges from commoning or vice versa is unclear. It is likely that they co-emerge. Further, both cases highlight how commoning can help to organise economic activity in line with degrowth.

BTL and CommonEn are in stark contrast to many cases in literature on degrowth and organisation, where specific business activity is argued to align with degrowth (see Khmara and Kronenberg 2018; Nesterova 2020; Wells 2018). Such literature only superficially reforms business or business activity to roughly fit with degrowth, similar to the application of other sustainability concepts, for example corporate social responsibility in business and management literature. CommonEn and BTL align with degrowth at their core and can be regarded as political agents for degrowth.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illustrate how commoning as an organisational form might support degrowth transformation to become a reality. The two organisations analysed highlight how political degrowth alignment can be achieved, particularly through commoning. For degrowth scholarship, this emphasises commoning as a fruitful avenue on the level of organisations. Further research attention is needed on such radically alternative forms of organising economic activity.

However, limitations exist. The political activity displayed by the two organisations does not represent any societal shift of the grand scale required to overcome capitalism. Commoning is not a silver bullet to overcome capitalism and to align economic activity with degrowth. Commons and commoning face the potential of co-optation. However, consciously degrowth-aligned commoning organisations can counteract this threat.

While both CommonEn and BTL clearly display alternative ways of organising economic activity for degrowth, barriers and risks remain while both organisations stay within a capitalist materiality, which entails compromises for survival. However, should these communities be belittled for dreaming, exploring and applying alternative pathways? Significantly, these examples expand the horizons of what degrowth in practice could look like, while giving practitioners real-life experiences to refine along degrowth pathways. Ultimately, commoning as an organisational form for degrowth shows great potential and more research is needed to explore their alliance in depth.

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ECOSOCIALISM AND DEGROWTH

Gareth Dale

The term 'ecosocialism' only entered common usage among environmental activists and commentators at the end of the 20th century, yet its roots can be identified nearly two centuries earlier. In this chapter, I chart the evolution of ecosocialism from the early 19th century to the present day. I consider it as a development of, and deviation from, earlier socialist traditions, as well as in its relationship to degrowth. I approach the material historically, surveying the evolution of growth-sceptical and eco-socialist currents, as well as the 'productivist' socialisms that they challenge. Although growth ideology did not achieve its full form until the 20th century, its pre-history was long, and the same applies to critiques of growth. The 1970s was a pivotal decade when different strands of growth critique became more visible and more coherently articulated, but they had begun to emerge already in the 18th century, if not before, in critiques of colonial capitalism and industrialism (Schmelzer 2022).

Socialism, like degrowth, can be approached as a social movement, an ethico-political stance or a political ideology. My focus here is on ideas and ideology, more than social movements. Political ideology, in Michael Freeden's 'morphological' sense, refers to patterned and recurring sets of ideas and values that structure the terrain of socio-political discourse – they possess identifiable shapes even as they mutate, mutually influencing and overlapping with other political ideologies (Eagleton-Pierce 2021). But the morphological conception has a blind spot: it portrays political ideologies as pluralistic and free-floating. If some, notably Freeden's own liberalism, are more popular, this is seen as a natural outcome of healthy competition within the marketplace of political ideas. As such, the morphological conception in itself is ideological in the Marxist sense – it naturalises and mystifies the reigning hierarchies of social power.

Socialism, throughout its history, has been defined against the prevailing political ideologies of liberalism and conservatism. These emanated from, and justified, the institutions of capitalism, its systems of market economy, private property, wage labour, nation-states, 'rule of law', and colonial and neo-colonial domination. Differences between the two system-supporting ideologies are a matter of emphasis, with nation and mysticism closer to the conservative heart, global markets and rationalism to the liberal; suspicion of reform for one, meliorism for the other, and so on. In common they represent the historically constructed capitalist 'order' as natural and transhistorical, inevitable and fundamentally good.

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The twin system-supporting ideologies originated in a historical period in which revolutions were securing the early victories of capitalist forces. Liberalism's early appearances came during the Dutch revolt and the English civil war, and conservatism during the French revolution – at the same moment, as it happens, that the term *ideology* was coined. Modern conservatism's seminal opus was the pamphlet by Edmund Burke (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, on the first 15 months of that upheaval. Yet those same revolutions – with institutions visibly being made, unmade, and re-imagined – also encouraged critical ideologies to emerge. In revolutionary England and France, such groups as the Diggers, Levellers and La societé des égaux mobilised behind radically democratic demands that the propertied classes would not countenance. In short, in revolutionary conjunctures critical approaches to the emergent capitalist order came to the fore, which then, following the French Revolution, crystallised as socialism and anarchism.

This is not to suggest a simple binary of liberalism and conservatism as system-supporting ideologies in contrast to socialism and anarchism. The latter, system-critical, currents channel the assumptions and prejudices of the world in which they have evolved. They exist as fields of contest, crisscrossed by multiple divisions, some of which concern nature–society relations. In the next section, I suggest that a divide between 'productivist' and 'eco' socialisms existed from the very beginning.

Early productivist socialism

Among the first to claim the word 'socialism' were followers of the French count Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). Saint-Simon's philosophy was born of and against the French Revolution. That is to say, he opposed its leaders and the Terror, while retaining something of its spirit: a conviction that social institutions (including property) are subject to change and replacement, an awareness of the pivotal role played by ideas at historical switching points, a commitment to a more rationalised bourgeois order, and a belief that human history takes the form of linear Progress, such that a new order on a higher spiritual plane was already coming into view. As the founder of socialism's 'productivist' branch, Saint-Simon anticipated a socialist order that would be geared to 'the positive purpose of increasing its prosperity, at a minimum cost and in minimum time' (cited in Hayek 2013, p. 207). He revered France's big corporations, seeing in their organisational structure and rationality the blueprint for an efficiently administered society, with their wealth as a fund to be tapped for public-works programmes. The heroes of his socialist future would not be workers – who should remain subordinated to their employers (Carlisle 1974, p. 448) – but industrialists, scientists and engineers, flanked by bankers and artists (Saint-Simon 1964 [1825], p. 77). A diehard defender of social hierarchy, crowned by the 'magnificent diamond' of the monarchy itself (Saint-Simon 1964 [1825], p. 80); he saw no role for proletarian democracy – or indeed for any democracy at all.

The socialism of the Saint-Simonians, notwithstanding their criticisms of laissez-faire policies, which they held responsible for economic crises, and of the 'bourgeoisie', which they defined idiosyncratically as the class of lawyers and 'metaphysicians', was thoroughly bourgeois. Social progress would come through industrialisation, with scientists and business leaders at the helm, and would be motivated by goals of economic efficiency, scientific and technological advance, a rationalised management of social organisation, and the European control of the colonised world. They aspired, in short, to the 'progressive increase of control by man over things'; they affirmed and helped to consolidate a core ideology of bourgeois rule: the growth paradigm (Kumar 1978, p. 40; Dale 2017).

Breaking nature's social union

In the same period, the early 19th century, other socialists were developing ideas critical of growth ideology. The Swiss economist JCL Simonde de Sismondi, an economic Romantic and a socialist *avant la lettre*, was a precursor of Germany's historicist economists in his 'ethical economics', and of Russia's Narodniks and Karl Polanyi in his championing of peasant production, guild organisation and local economies (Lenin 1897; Polanyi 1945). His blasts against liberal political economy anticipated socialist and ecological critiques of growthism. The quest to maximise output, he maintained, had overshadowed the true goals of economic activity – leisure and the use and enjoyment of goods. Money had become an end in itself and, in a class-divided society, this led the propertyless to overwork in order that the propertied could overconsume – a condition that was most egregious in Britain, a land of abject poverty amid plenty. In the United States (US), too, Sismondi (1991 [1818], p. 339) lamented:

> profit making has become the first aim in life [and] liberty itself has been cheapened relative to profit. The calculating business spirit extends down to the children; it subjects real estate to constant speculation; . . . it corrupts the very agents of a free government, who show a not-very-respectable avidity for office.

If Sismondi did not explicitly identify as a socialist, others influenced by his thinking did. One was the Irish socialist feminist William Thompson (Pankhurst 1991, pp. 38, 44). In his *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, Thompson (1824) constructed a counter-hegemonic discourse of critical political economy (McNally 2000, p. 445). Taking aim at Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo, Thompson (1824, p. vi) charged them with having no other concern than to ensure that:

> the machines, whether living, as cows, men, or horses . . . should produce in the greatest abundance all articles of food, clothing, shelter, and elegance, or caprice; and that, on the other hand, means should be devised that an abundance of consumers should be found to use the articles produced, so that every year a continual demand should be kept up for these or similar articles.

Political economy in their hands had become a vulgar discipline devoted to a narrowly economic goal – 'how to raise the greatest produce and to ensure the greatest consumption' (Thompson 1824, p. vi). This rendered superfluous all the critical questions of how and by whom the goods are produced – 'whether by camels, horses, men, slaves or not slaves, whether by hard labour or easy labour, [or] by healthful or life-consuming exertion' (Thompson 1824, p. vi). Economic growth, Thompson conceded, may be worth pursuing but only if the needs of the populace are first acknowledged as society's paramount concern, with resource distribution conducted justly.

Alongside the critical political economy of Sismondi and Thompson, the same period saw the first stirrings of *romantic ecosocialism*. Its exponents diagnosed the assault by capitalist forces on the biosphere and prescribed reforms to heal the wounds. An early exemplar – a precursor of romanticism and socialism – was Rabbie Burns. His *Now Westlin Winds* (1775) inveighs against blood sports and 'Tyrannic man's dominion', while *To a Mouse* is a lament on the breaking of 'Nature's social union' under 'Man's dominion' (Burns 1785). But if the romantic-socialist tradition has one founding document, I would venture, it was Charles Fourier's (2017 [1821])

Material deterioration of the planet. In his views on growth, progress, civilisation and the natural world, Fourier established a distinctively 'eco' strand within the socialist movement. In contrast to Saint-Simon, Fourier (2017 [1821], Gareth Dale translation) decried 'the ravages [of] civilised industry' – his term for industrial capitalism. Not only the earth but even the air, Fourier (1901, p. 110) blazed, is subject to 'industrial exploitation'. Fourier (1901, p. 109) accused 'Civilized and Barbarian societies' alike of 'despoiling the soil and the climate', such that the 'health' of the planet itself suffered grievously. In some branches of industry, wrote Fourier (1901, p. 109) civilisation was 'wholly savage' while:

> in other branches of great importance notably water and forests, we fall far below the savages. For we do not, like them, confine ourselves to leaving them uncultivated; we bring the axe and destruction, and the result is landslides, the denuding of mountain-sides, and the deterioration of the climate.

Future earth dwellers, Fourier (1901, p. 109) warned, 'will curse civilisation' for the ecological damage it has wreaked. In 1821, the suggestion of Fourier (2017 [1821]) that some branches of industry in civilised Europe were 'beneath the savages' was audacious indeed.

Narodnik ecosocialisms

Ecosocialism's next step, in the mid-19th century, occurred in the context of a flourishing of the life sciences – notably Justus von Liebig's agronomic discoveries in the 1840s and, in 1859, Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. Ernst Haeckel, steeped in a Romantic *Naturphilosophie* that treats the natural world as a living whole, coined the term 'ecology' to refer to a science that studies 'the interrelationships of organisms with one another and with their environment' (Haeckel 1866, p. 286, Gareth Dale translation). As industrialisation and urbanisation gathered steam, interest in energy and thermodynamics blossomed – particularly following the celebrated essay by Sadi Carnot (1988 [1824]) – as did Malthusian concerns over resource exhaustion and the limits to growth. In 1864, George Perkins Marsh proposed in *Man and Nature* that the collapse of the Greek and Roman empires had resulted from their degradation of the environment (Cronon 1994, p. 606). Two years later, in *The Coal Question*, William Jevons (1866) fretted that a similar fate would befall British imperialism if coal were to run short.

One figure sometimes nominated as an early ecosocialist is the Ukrainian Narodnik physician and philosopher Serhiy Podolynsky (1850–1891) aka Sergei Podolinski (Martinez-Alier 1987; O'Connor 1998; Burkett and Foster 2008). His interests lay in energy economics, socialism and Darwinian evolution. His best-known argument was his redefining of labour productivity as the accumulation of energy (Podolinsky 1883, p. 454). Humans are energy accumulators – they can be likened to the 'perfect thermodynamic engine' of Carnot (1988 [1824]), in that they convert heat into work and vice versa. Humanity's species history, Podolinsky (1883, p. 454) proposed, is at core the evolution of our ability to accumulate energy, for it is upon this that all social progress depends, as measured by economic prosperity and population size. According to his 'march of progress' narrative, in prehistoric times, 'savages, lacking culture as they did not perform labour', possessed barely any ability to store energy (Podolinsky 1883, pp. 453–6, Gareth Dale translation). From these lowly beginnings, the slave economies of antiquity represented a significant advance, and feudalism was a small step further, before capitalism facilitated a prodigious leap in our ability to accumulate energy and apply it to machinery (Podolinsky 1883, p. 457). In socialism, in contrast to capitalism, productivity gains would bring reductions in working time,

even as the transhistorical trend to the ever-greater 'accumulation of energy' would continue and accelerate.

That Podolynsky has been hailed an ecosocialist rests on his anti-capitalist politics combined with the thesis that energy is the key to social progress. An alternative lineage, romantic ecosocialism, was also active among his Narodnik comrades. Its best-known exponent was the Russian novelist and philosopher Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–1889). In his works, such as *What Is to Be Done?* (Chernyshevsky 1989 [1863]), one finds Romantic panegyrics to fauna and flora (at least insofar as they have been tamed and cultivated by humans), a taste for the frugal life, and a belief in the ability of the peasant commune to form the basis of a socialist order. In common with nearly all 19th-century socialists, however, he exuded boundless confidence in the transformative potential of technologies. England, with its population of 17 million would, he enthused, grow its population to 150 million if technology were systematically applied to agriculture (Franco 2021).

Marx, Engels and productive forces

In the age of Saint-Simon and Fourier, socialist groups were small, centred in clubs and societies, and a scattering of 'utopian' communes. They did not orient to working people, seeing them as deserving of charity or respect but not as agents of socialist transformation. In the 1840s this shifted, thanks to social movements: Chartism, cooperatives and the 1848 revolutions. As popular militancy surged the socialist tree branched out, most significantly with the revolutionary ecosocialism of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Taking inspiration from Chartism and the 1848 revolutions, they were the first socialists to fuse two previously separated aspirations – the collectivist re-structuring of society and the democratic self-activity of the working class (Draper 1966). Their vision of socialism as revolutionary democracy gained further definition in 1871, when working people demonstrated that they can successfully overthrow the capitalist state and construct their own, radically democratic, institutions, specifically the Paris Commune. Unlike bourgeois governments run by elites through their 'oligarchic club', wrote Marx (1871), the commune demonstrated the capacity of the people to act 'for itself by itself'.

In that they celebrate humanity's world-transforming capacities and technological advance, Marx and Engels' ecosocialism is contested. Were they not 'Prometheans' who worshipped at the altar of economic growth and technological progress? Certainly, they marvelled at technology's role in the construction of industrial plants, which, in turn, would enable the potential abundance on which a transition to communism would depend. And yet, with Fourier and against Saint-Simon, they also took inspiration from pre-industrial – indeed, pre-civilisational – 'primitive communism'. They knew admiration for the world-changing forces of capitalist industrialisation and yet were no techno-utopians or growth boosters. Nor did they hold that socialist revolution must await global industrialisation. As is evident from the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1848), they believed that the productive forces, at least in some regions, had already crossed the threshold at which a transition to communism could commence. This was in 1848, before the invention of the car, the telephone, even the safety pin.

At the heart of debates over Marx's ecosocialism lie differing interpretations of production and the productive forces (*Produktivkräfte*). Production can be thought of as brute economic output, but this was not Marx's usage. Rather, as Eric Wolf (1982, p. 21) explains, production embraces:

> at once the changing relations of humankind to nature, the social relations into which humans enter in the course of transforming nature, and the consequent transformations of

> human symbolic capability. The concept is thus not merely economic in the strict sense but also ecological, social, political, and social-psychological.

As to the productive forces, they signify human creative capacities in the most universal and general sense. Marx (1975 [1845]) chides Saint-Simon for having confused productive forces in that sense with their specifically bourgeois form. Under capitalism, Marx and Engels (1845) wrote, the productive forces receive 'a one-sided development only', becoming, for the masses, 'destructive forces'. Production in capitalist society 'appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production', with concrete human labour, and therefore human life activity and creativity itself, subjected to an 'external end' – the drive to accumulate capital (Marx 1973 [1857–1861], p. 488).

This is the nub of Marx and Engels' critique of growth ideology. Although 'economic growth' had not yet entered the lexicon, the social relations that constitute it were the subject of their critique, in several respects. One is their identification of the 'fuel', so to speak, of the growth drive – 'the restless never-ending process of profit-making' as the historical mission of the bourgeoisie (Marx 1887 [1867]). Another is the fetishised form that it assumes. Only in a society based on wage labour does the production and exchange of goods and services appear as an independent domain – the 'economy'. In this topsy-turvy world, material relations between persons take the 'fantastic form' of relations between things. This fetish character of commodities underpins the ideology of growth. Third, Marx developed the critique, earlier adumbrated by Sismondi, Thompson and others, of the relative poverty necessarily generated by capitalist growth. 'Rapid growth of productive capital calls forth just as rapid a growth of wealth, of luxury, of social needs and social pleasures', wrote Marx (1847) in *Wage Labour and Capital*, consequently:

> although the pleasures of the labourer have increased, the social gratification which they afford has fallen in comparison with the increased pleasures of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, in comparison with the stage of development of society in general.

The final element in Marx and Engels' growth critique flows from their materialism, a philosophy centred on the metabolism (*Stoffwechsel)* between humans and their natural environment (Bensaïd 2009, p. 323). His metabolic conception of nature–society relations departed dramatically from the bourgeois point of view of its 'usefulness to man' (Schmidt 1971, pp. 78–9), while his concept of alienation introduced the fundamentally ecosocialist idea that under capitalism the subordination of labour operates conjointly with the subjugation of nature. Humanity's metabolism with nature, as he theorised it, had become annexed to the drive to distort, despoil and to expand value at an increasing pace, as accumulation is sustained by ever greater material inputs in a process that 'goes on uninterruptedly, with feverish haste and upon an ever more gigantic scale' (Marx 1847). Moreover, Marx's critique of political economy points to the mechanisms by which capital not only wreaks ecological destruction but obscures the process (Brown 2024).

In their later lives, Marx and Engels' ecological awareness deepened. Following his reading of Justus von Liebig on soil depletion, Marx refers to a metabolic rift between human society and nature (Foster 2000), and developed a critical awareness of numerous empirical elements of humanity's interaction with its environment, including cash crop agriculture, deforestation and its effects, and the wastefulness of manufacturing industry (Saito 2017). Meanwhile, in his *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels (1940 [1883]) admonished those who conceive nature as something to be conquered and identified the system-driven quest for short-term profit as culpable for the despoliation of the natural world.

In short, Marx and Engels developed an understanding of capitalism as a future-blind system that is driven to sabotage its conditions of possibility, a system that moulds human society around the compulsive drive to accumulate, with each capital forced to expand sales, expand the scale of production, suppress costs (including wages), and treat nature as an externality. This accumulation drive governs the behaviour of businesses and states – the owners and controllers of most of the world's land and resources – but the way we apprehend it is mediated ideologically, as 'growth'.

Marx and Engels' ecosocialism was developed by numerous followers, of whom William Morris (1834–1896) deserves particular mention. He braided romantic and Marxian threads into a social-aesthetic critique of the injustice and ugliness of industrial capitalism. How modern civilisation's 'neglect of art' has despoiled our planet ('this great treasure of mankind') he laments in *Hopes and Fears on Art* (Morris 1882). The earth, 'which was beautiful before man lived on it', and for thousands of years grew more beautiful as humans 'grew in numbers and power, is now growing uglier day by day', and its decline is the most egregious 'where civilisation is the mightiest' (Morris 1882). Culpable for the decline was the system of 'modern commerce'; to squeeze every last ounce of profit from a patch of land, people will 'cut down the pleasant trees . . . blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke' (Morris, cited in Bartels 2003).

Socialist growthmanship

In the late 19th century Morris was an outstanding example of an ecosocialist working within a Marxist orbit. He was, however, an exception. Although the environmentalist commitments of Marx and Engels have recently been explored in detail (Burkett 1999; Foster 2000; Saito 2017), they had hitherto been read chiefly as boosters of industrialisation and economic growth. Why was this?

Essentially, the socialist movement evolved into a project of state-capitalist modernisation, along Saint-Simonian lines albeit with greater emphasis on the extension of state control. Socialists hailed nationalisations as 'state socialism' even when, as with German Chancellor Bismarck's nationalisation of railways, it was simply a war measure. To Germany's social-democrat leader, Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864), and to the *Kathedersozialisten* (academic socialists), the state was not, as Marx argued, an instrument of class domination but of rational regulation and social justice – and the administrator of the growth drive (albeit the latter, at this time, was formulated in terms of prosperity, opulence, wealth and so on). An influential early intervention was that of Karl Rodbertus (1805–1875), a *Kathedersozialist* and close friend of Lassalle. He subscribed to Ricardo's 'iron law of wages' – the thesis that, without intervention, the wage share of national income inevitably declines – and proposed a strategy to counter it based on producer cooperatives, state intervention and growth. Society, maintained Rodbertus, 'needs the unrestricted growth of wealth'; indeed, whoever obstructs 'the growth of wealth stands in the way of social progress *tout court*' for every expansion of 'knowledge and know how is bound up with the increase in wealth' (Rodbertus 1850, p. 80, Gareth Dale translation).

Marx and Engels' attempts to win over Germany's social-democratic party were defeated by the Lassalleans and the *Kathedersozialisten*, and in European labour parties economic growth gained ever greater prominence as a policy goal. Fabian socialists such as Eduard Bernstein presented growth, together with parliamentary democracy, as the twin drivers of a grand evolutionary movement towards a socialist society (Steger 1997, p. 177). A paradigmatic case was Sweden's Social Democratic Party (SAP). Early on, the SAP's goals included working-class emancipation and the all-round transformation of capitalist society, including large-scale nationalisations

(Pontusson 1987). Later, in the inter-war period, the quest for 'equal rewards' and economic democracy, as well as the nationalisation programme, were abandoned in favour of aspirations to 'economic growth [and] democratised opportunities' (Esping-Andersen 1992, pp. 37–8; Berman 2006, p. 174). The shift was given theoretical justification by Keynesianism, which presented wage rises as a growth accelerator and no longer a brake. Finally, after World War II, the SAP's strategy centred on promoting growth through wage bargaining. Wage rises for low-paid workers would compel businesses to invest, while wage restraint for higher-paid workers would encourage the expansion of the more efficient sectors by boosting their profits (Pontusson 1987). In such ways, Keynesianism and social democracy came to be identified with a 'grand bargain' whereby regulated national capitalisms would foster growth, the fruits of which would then be fairly shared.

Meanwhile in Russia, the innovative and progressive environmental policies of the immediate post-revolutionary years found themselves steamrollered under Stalin's 'counter-revolution of modernisation' (Weiner 2000; Dale 2017). In 1928, industrialisation targets were revised sharply upwards, in order to 'Catch Up and Overtake' [Догнат и Перегнат] the West. Paradoxically perhaps, economic planning formed the centrepiece of the counter-revolution, for it was with the Five-Year Plan that coercion supplanted tolerance throughout Soviet society, competitive industrialisation became the national mantra, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union became 'economised', in that its overriding goal became mobilising society behind the growth drive. A state-capitalist growth ideology came into being, similar to its siblings in the West, in both content and in the enthusiasm it could invoke – among, for instance, the citizens who named their children Догнат (catch up) and Перегнат (overtake) (Chertkovskaya 2019).

In the mid-20th century, the world economy's most étatiste era, socialist and communist parties entered office, in East and West, and transformed into apparatuses of state management. When parties influenced by Marxism took the reins of capitalist states, such as the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Stalin's Russia or Mao's China, they quickly accommodated to capitalist norms and requirements. Thus, in the Soviet Union, Marxism was redesigned on conservative-developmentalist lines, in support of dirigiste industrialisation and Great Russian chauvinism.

'Pull the emergency brake!'

In socialism's march towards 'modernity', ecological critique was sidelined. But it was not snuffed out. In the margins, it developed. Labour movements themselves were continually throwing up environmental demands. These represent a continuation of the struggle for humane conditions of social reproduction; battles over the workplace environment are continuous with the goals of the environmental movement. One such, concerning the white phosphorus used in London's match factories, that brought necrosis to the matchgirls' jaws, catalysed the wave of industrial militancy from which the 'new unionism' arose. Other tributaries into socialist ecological thinking issued from religion, Rousseauian and Romantic philosophy, and science. Of the latter, the novelist HG Wells is a case in point. Although adhering to Fabianism, a social-democratic grouping not known for environmental leanings, *The Science of Life* (1929–1930), which Wells co-authored with Julian Huxley, called for pollution reduction, protection of endangered species, and the development of alternative sources of power (Worster 1994, p. 314). Ultimately, however, Wells and Huxley are better described as scientific rationalists or ecological modernisers than ecosocialists. They were believers in the advance of humanity's mastery of nature by means of ever-expanding technological power and, in this, they were followed by communist scientists such as Jack Haldane, JD Bernal and Joseph Needham (Wood 1959).

For sketches of a more richly ecological socialism emerging in the same period, one could do worse than read the communist philosopher Walter Benjamin. He was among the most acute critics of Marxism's technological-determinist turn, and the first to draw attention to the critique of technology fetishism in Marx's writings (Benjamin 1999, p. 195). Germany's SPD and its sister parties worldwide, he argued, had become prisoners of the conviction that the historical tide was on their side, pushed ever onward by the locomotive of 'technological development' (Benjamin 2006). From there, it had been a short step 'to the illusion that factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement', hence to a 'corrupted conception' of industry that recognises only 'progress in mastering nature' and not the attendant forms of regress, and finally to the 'naïvely complacent' belief – held by social-democrat and liberal economists alike – that nature donates itself 'gratis' to humanity (Benjamin 2006, p. 391). On the mastery of nature, the formulation of Benjamin (1928, Gareth Dale translation) is especially pregnant and worth quoting in full:

> The mastery of nature, according to the imperialists, is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a flogging-master who claimed that the purpose of education is the mastery of children by adults? Is education not above all the essential regulation of the relationship between the generations – and thus the mastery, if we are to speak of mastery, is of that relationship and not of children? In similar manner, technology is not about the mastery of nature but mastering the relationship between nature and humanity.

Against social democracy's conception of labour as the 'exploitation of nature', Benjamin (2006) affirmed Fourier's view of labour as a creative engagement with nature; against its accommodation with capitalism and its ideology of progress-as-mastery, he affirmed a communist politics aspiring to a rupture with the historical present. The goal, in his celebrated phrase that has more recently gained a degrowth resonance, must be to 'pull the emergency brake' (Benjamin 2006, p. 392).

Global South socialisms

Concurrently with Benjamin, the Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui was, on similar lines, concluding that social democracy had arrived at a bourgeois dead end. Mariátegui's writings are emblematic of what may be called Global South ecosocialism, in their focus on the extractivism and plunder that motivate the imperial, settler-colonial and neocolonial projects. The monocrop export agriculture of Peru's coastal plantations, Mariátegui (1928) describes, was the product of 'economic colonization' by Western capital. Overcoming imperial domination, however, would not be achieved via national capitalist development. Mariátegui had no time for the *soi-disant* anti-imperialisms that restricted their critique to the external shackles on 'capitalist growth and expansion', without heed to the class antagonisms on which any national capitalism would continue to rest (Mariátegui 1971 [1929]). The anti-imperial and class struggles, he argued, must be unified – and in the Latin American region that required indigenous communities to come to the fore, in alliance with other rural and urban working classes (Gonzalez 2019).

In his references to Pacha Mama and indigenous communitarianism, Mariátegui (1971 [1929]) anticipated 21st-century ecosocialisms, while his advocacy of the nationalisation of natural resources was in line with a broad swathe of socialist thinking. The problems of whether and how to catch up with the West, while exiting the extractivist models that prevailed in most post-colonial economies and conserving the natural environment, however, were as intractable then as now. Many Global South socialists would have concurred with Egyptian-French economist Samir Amin

(1976, p. 385), that 'there can be *no conflict* between growth and the construction of a worldwide socialist civilization'.

In Peru, a century after its independence, Mariátegui was grappling with the problem that formal sovereignty may well not negate actual subordination to Western capital. In the 1950s and 1960s similar problems spread out across Africa and Asia. All the newly liberated nations aspired to close the gap with the Global North through rapid growth, usually through import-substitution industrialisation and in some cases following the Soviet model. Socialist critique of the newly elevated national bourgeoisie was voiced most eloquently by the revolutionary Narodnik, Frantz Fanon. Pointing to the experience of Latin America where national capitalist classes usurped independence in the name of the nation and pursued their own agenda of 'avid, greedy and voracious' accumulation, Fanon urged the newly liberated nations to take a different track, and above all to resist the temptation 'to catch up with Europe' (1963 [1961], p. 321). That continent lives at 'a mad, reckless pace' – having 'shaken off all reason' it is running 'headlong into the abyss' (Fanon 1963 [1961], p. 312; Zeilig 2015).

Headlong growth was the hallmark of many of the 'communist' societies too. They generally followed the Stalinist model in pursuing rapid industrialisation without regard for the environmental cost. China, notably, poured more cement in just two years (2020–2021) than did the US over the entire 20th century. Its per capita carbon emissions, though lower than those of the US, exceed those of both the European Union and of Japan. Yet the 'communist' experience is far from monolithic (Dale and Unkovski-Korica 2023). Cuba's material and energy usage has been markedly less profligate than that of the Soviet Union or China. Why is this? Essentially, it was born of necessity. Much like a war economy – when material consumption and energy imports are constrained – the nation had to 'make do and mend'.

In its early post-revolution years, economically besieged by the behemoth across the Florida Straits, Havana moved into the Soviet camp. Receiving, in view of its geopolitical situation, unusual largesse from Moscow (Sanchez-Sibony 2022), Cuba could trade sugar for oil at advantageous prices – and it re-exported some oil such that, by the 1980s, oil surpassed sugar as Cuba's principal hard-currency earner (Perez-Lopez 1987). That meant, however, that when the spigots of cheap oil and fertilisers switched off following Comecon's collapse, Cuba's economy had to turn on a dime. A notable adaptation was the turn to agroecology and organic farming, with its lower energy and fertiliser requirements. Alongside these material, war-economic factors, Cuba's ecosocialist policies and rhetoric arguably reflect the anti-imperialist commitments of the 1957–1959 revolution that had brought Fidel Castro to power. During the 'age of ecology' that dawned shortly after that revolution, Castro became known on the world stage for speeches that castigated the rich world for its environmentally ruinous and unjust policies and consumption habits (Castro 2022 [1992]).

Red-green emergence and planetary emergency

The Age of Ecology can be variously dated. It is generally considered to have commenced with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, drawing attention to the ecocide perpetrated by the chemical and agricultural industries (Radkau 2014). An alternative date would be the public response to radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons testing in the 1940s and 1950s, and the recognition that in the nuclear age humanity was developing the technological capacity to destroy its natural conditions (Foster 2020). Either way, these and other ecocidal acts globalised and intensified, during the 'Great Acceleration'.

In grappling with the increasingly troubling onslaught of capitalist economy on the biosphere, the output of ecosocialist ideas accelerated rapidly too, authored by non-Marxists – Karl Polanyi

(Dale 2021) and Ernst Schumacher deserve mention – and by Marxists, including Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, André Gorz (1980 [1975]), Raymond Williams, Wolfgang Harich, Erich Fromm, Cornelius Castoriadis and Ernest Mandel. Their ideas, when spliced with *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) manifesto and with romantic and religious critiques of industrial modernity, formed the intellectual pre-history of the degrowth movement.

As the environmental movement developed, it diversified, growing liberal, socialist, anarchist, feminist and many other branches. Ecosocialist activists found their natural habitat in labour movements and in environmental justice campaigns – or what Martinez-Alier (2002) calls the 'environmentalism of the poor'. Ecosocialism's highwater mark arrived during the worldwide social-movement upturn of the 1960s and 1970s. The context of surging labour militancy and campaigns challenging all manner of injustices, oppression and war, provided soil in which alliances and fusions of 'green' and 'red' constituencies and campaigns could flourish, exemplified in the ecosocialism of US labour leader Tony Mazzocchi, in Britain in the Lucas plan, and in Australia's green bans, as 'red' activists and methods swung behind 'green' goals.

Since those days, the fate of ecosocialism has been determined by three principal developments. One was the retreat of labour radicalism and socialism. The latter underwent gentrification, its discourse becoming more academic (in both senses). Socialism's presence in anglophone consciousness, according to Google Books ngram viewer (2024), reached a nadir in 2009, returning to a level of mentions last seen in 1885 (although since 2009 the line has picked up somewhat). The second was a deepening of capitalist hegemony, together with a shift from the étatiste forms of the middle quarters of the 20th century to neoliberal regimes. Neoliberal forces set out to sever alliances between labour radicals and greens, by linking environmental regulation – indeed any regulation – with job losses. Environmental campaigns became more dominated by their professional layers, and prone to dismiss working people as uninterested in 'postmaterial' values, while 'green' parties evolved into managers of neoliberal order.

Third, the world's environmental crisis intensified exponentially, to the extent that doubts over the future of humanity are now commonly voiced – as is, harking back to the second development, the observation that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This necessitates that the major system-supporting ideologies develop ever more sophisticated strategies of cognitive dissonance and denial. Conservatism traditionally conveyed a concern for protecting existing habitat, for organic and evolutionary change with an aversion to experimentation, yet its adherents have been conducting far and away the greatest experiment with society and with the planet, through the rule of capital. Liberalism, for its part, is known for its meliorist inclinations and yet, on account of its commitment to the sanctity of private property and market economics, its devotees are driving the world towards desertification and desolation. Against this, ecosocialism appeals to principles that reflect the human capacities urgently required in the face of social crisis and environmental ruination, namely solidarity with, and care for the life and habitat of, other humans and other species, in particular those who face oppression or other hindrances. It looks to participatory democracy and economic planning, as institutions through which to re-structure the goal of social production from the never-ending accumulation to human needs. Of the latter, the habitability of the planet – including climate and biodiversity – is far and away the most fundamental.

Ecosocialism and degrowth

At a time when environmental movements are dominated by middle-class layers, and labour movements are dominated by their middle-class bureaucracies, ecosocialism can appear

oxymoronic. In the era of 'capitalist realism', class-struggle environmentalism has been subdued (Fisher 2009; Dale 2024). Ecosocialists, like degrowthers, experience the usual dilemma of left-wing activism, to either retain a single-minded focus on the revolutionary horizon or to bind oneself more closely into existing institutions, thereby enabling greater popular reach but with the cost that the 'minimum programme' becomes everything, the goal forgotten, or endlessly deferred.

The ecosocialist and degrowth movements challenge one another. The former question degrowthers' concept of 'growthism', arguing that it is better grasped as a product of capitalism, as the capital relation is the fundamental determinant of growth and its ideology. Degrowthers meanwhile, even as they contributed to socialism's ecological awakening and to ecosocialist thinking on technology, consumption and the 'manufacture of needs', catalysed divisions within the ecosocialist camp. Between degrowthers and ecosocialist backers of a Green New Deal, there has been a level of 'misplaced rivalry' too (Dale 2019). Liberal degrowthers – who envisage a society of private property, markets, individualism along with the three R's of 'reduce, reuse, recycle' – have little in common with ecosocialist collectivism and planning (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018, p. 257; Wilkins and Murphy 2021). At the radical ends of the degrowth and ecosocialist spectrums, however, we find common positions, notably on what Hannah Holleman (2018, p. 162) calls the four R's of radical environmentalism, namely restoration of earth systems, restitution of lands and sovereignty, reparations for slavery and revolution.

Naturally, given the formative influence of ecosocialists on the degrowth movement, strong affinities connect the two. Many degrowthers look to powerful unions as vital allies in the struggles for a shorter working week, for 'climate jobs' programmes within a just transition, wealth redistribution and universal basic services. They recognise that 'growthism' is a product of capitalism and acknowledge the conjoined causation of social polarisation and environmental despoliation. Together with degrowthers, many ecosocialists recognise that tackling the intensifying environmental crises requires far more than, say, the nationalisation of energy suppliers and programmes of sectoral transition (in transport, energy supply and so on); it requires, in addition, colossal reductions in energy use and material throughput, at least in the rich world, reductions that, while focused on the highest consumers, will affect working people, too. They jointly envisage a future of 'public luxury and private sufficiency', a world in which more affordable housing, building insulation, public transport, clean air and self-governed time would enable the quality of life for the masses to improve immeasurably, even as many consumer goods, notably flights, SUVs and beef, disappear from the menu.

A convergence of the radical fringes of both camps would look to a 'degrowth-communist' future, with swingeing degrowth for the tycoon class and the rich, coupled with a 'revolutionary transformation of labour and production' to ensure resources be devoted to enabling billions of poor people to access clean water, food and shelter, sanitation and other amenities (Saito 2024, p. 183). Collective decision-making through democratic planning mechanisms at various scales, from the local – workplaces and neighbourhoods – to the global, would replace profit by ecological and human need as the goal of production (Vettese and Pendergrass 2022).

As of the mid-2020s, such aspirations exist largely in the form of system-critique and utopian vision. Should ecosocialism fail, the prospect will be of an exponentially worsening assault by capital on the earth's biophysical boundaries. It is 165 years since the prospect of climate change-caused human extinction was first broached (Wilson 1858). If global capitalism continues for a span of similar length, all bets would be off, as cascading ecosystem collapse and an acceleration of the Sixth Great Extinction would bring the collective suicide – or is it murder? – of our own extravagantly gifted species into view, and with it, one presumes, a refutation of the anthropocentric ethics that have guided most ecosocialists hitherto.

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34
BEYOND GROWTH
Beyond divisions

Anuna De Wever (Van Der Heyden) and Lena Hartog

There are so many reasons why it's beautiful to be young. All life's roads are still open, everything seems possible, the world lies ahead of you. No matter where in the world, being young means one thing: there's more future than history, more possibility than past. Yet increasingly, the idea of the future seems closer to a nightmare that keeps you up at night than to a dream to be cherished.

As young activists today, we live in a constant fear of the century that is to come. The century that will define our life. Increasingly we understand that the climate crisis is not just the first chapter of a book in which we get to reimagine the future of the world. Rather, it is the last chapter of a system that has existed through the exploitation of both humans and the planet. The climate-cum-ecological crisis is exacerbating every existing crisis, because it is deeply connected to our economy. Welcome to late-stage capitalism and its associated toxic concepts.

Despite the seeming abundance of ambitious political rhetoric, the rapid rise of greenhouse gas emissions and global temperatures marches on. Not only the 1.5°C threshold of global warming but also more of the nine planetary boundaries such as biodiversity loss and ocean acidification deemed critical for human survival, are now breached and have become mere waypoints en route to a 2°C or 3°C increase. These crises are interconnected through tipping points and feedback loops, and the marginal differences between these figures could mean the difference between life and death for millions worldwide.

In the shadow of this existential dread lies a recognition that we may find ourselves in one of the most influential moments in human history. Because of the severity and urgency of the crisis we are in, this century is ready for new monumental concepts to emerge into the limelight. For, in the end, it is the stories we tell ourselves that shape our understanding of the world. Recently emerging capitalism and endless growth is a story that contains countless lies. In its political story, growth has promised freedom, fulfilment and prosperity for all, but in reality it has alienated us from our work, created dependency on technology and money, all the while distorting the possibility for us to imagine something beyond growth.

Beyond unveiling those lies, there is a big opportunity for a new story to be told. And a desire from younger generations to tell that story, built on ancestral knowledge of those who came before us and those still alive who refused it, to genuinely make that story come to life. If growth promised freedom but made us dependent, how can we be truly free? If growth promised happiness but gave us anxiety and alienation, how can we be truly happy? And if growth made us think

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that capitalism is the only way forward, how can we imagine a world in which many worlds are possible?

Central to this reimagining is the concept of degrowth – a radical departure from the ideology of perpetual economic expansion that has dominated the global discourse for centuries. A small but powerful minority of humans has been obsessed with growth, extraction and expansion on a scale that has devastated the world since the beginning of the late 15th century. Over 500 years, an imperialistic imaginary in Europe has been imposed, driven and inspired a form of economy that has cost – much more than it has served – humanity.

Genocide and slavery lay at the roots of economic growth in the West. Today, those colonial tools are found in trade agreements, corporate domination and political and economic institutions. To justify this, white supremacy, patriarchy and class superiority have been essential ideologies. Creating a world of inequality and divide. And now, we have arrived at the last stage of this self-destructive system. The climate crisis.

While the climate crisis affects us all, the reality is that we're not all in the same boat. A minority navigates this storm in fully equipped ships, capable of withstanding harsh conditions. A majority finds themselves in weak, rickety boats, scarcely equipped to manage the storms. These different vessels are not coincidental but a result of the artificial scarcity growth created: climate overshoot in the Global North and climate vulnerability in the Global South are two sides of the same colonial coin.

We can see this very clearly at Conferences of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in which every year all nations and world leaders come together to discuss the world's response to the climate crisis. While Western leaders like Ursula Von der Leyden, the president of the European Commission, praise the 'multilateral agreements to combat climate change' as if we were moving forward with unprecedented ambition, the president of Tuvalu declares that: 'You [rich nations] might as well bomb our islands instead of making us suffer . . . [a] slow and fateful demise' (RNZ 2021). They sit in different vessels and therefore look at the magnitude of the waves very differently.

The pursuit of continuous economic growth has been sold to us as a universal remedy for all societal ills. Yet, this relentless expansion has come at a tremendous cost to the planet and its inhabitants. So, as young people, we wonder where in the conventional economic discourse we forgot to ask the crucial questions – 'For whom are we growing this economy? And at what cost?' Instead of this blind obsession with growth, why have we not thought more deeply about what really matters? The true beneficiaries of current growth are very limited even though mainstream economic models will hide the externalities to such an extent that it's data paint a positive picture. This reveals a system intrinsically designed to privilege a select few while exploiting many. Acknowledging the underpinnings of white supremacy, colonialism, and imperialism in shaping the current economic paradigm is essential for understanding the necessity of degrowth. These historical and systemic injustices are not merely relics of the past but active components of an economy that perpetuates today's inequality and ecological collapse.

The interconnectedness of our crises

There was a certain naivety in which our work as climate activists began. Mobilising a hundred thousand people on the streets of Brussels for weeks on end until the national and European elections in 2019, our demand was clear – *ambitious climate action*.

Five years later, there is a deeper truth behind that demand that makes us wonder about the effectiveness of championing 'climate' action, which essentially means we intentionally focus

more on the *consequences* of a system – such as global warming – than *the system itself*. What if the climate crisis cannot be battled with climate policy? We have sat around many tables with influential people, championing ambitious climate policy. Yet, emissions and temperatures are rising, and the crisis has only gotten worse. Up to a point that now even the scientific community is practising civil disobedience to desperately get attention back onto the severity and urgency of the situation.

What if climate policy, within a growth-obsessed economy, is bound to fail? What if the dream of so-called green growth has become the cornerstone of our own demise? A distraction so well-articulated that it has merely created another story we must counter, instead of being a stepping stone towards a liveable future. What if the debate is not about green growth's feasibility but whether eternal growth is ever something we as humans should desire for ourselves and our societies?

The crises of climate change, economic inequality and social fragmentation are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interwoven into the fabric of the global economy. Degrowth challenges us to rethink narratives of scarcity, the obsession with growth and the constructed ideals of development that have long dictated policy and societal values. What if we could let go of our narrow ways of thinking that we *need to grow*, no matter what? And take a few steps back to understand who we are growing for, what lies beneath it, what we do to protect it, and what it costs humanity?

Political polarisation, a consequential by-product of capitalism's enduring reign, has increasingly fragmented our societies, driving a deep wedge between us on issues that demand unity and collective action. This division is not merely a symptom of differing opinions but a direct outcome of a system that thrives on competition and inequality. The urgency for movements to connect the dots has never been more critical. To view the climate crisis, poverty, and inequality through isolated lenses is to miss the forest for the trees. Our fragmented approach has led us down a path of incremental changes and siloed activism, where victories in one arena are often undermined by setbacks in another. The climate movement, for instance, has at times focused narrowly on carbon emissions and renewable energy, without fully grappling with the underlying economic systems that perpetuate environmental degradation alongside social and economic injustices.

The movements advocating for environmental sustainability, economic justice and social equity must see themselves as part of a larger struggle against a mutual enemy – a capitalist system that values profit over people and the planet. Such a systemic approach does not just add a layer to our activism but fundamentally changes its nature. It calls for a re-evaluation of our strategies, tactics, and goals, demanding that we not only advocate for environmental protection but also for the redistribution of wealth, the democratisation of our institutions, and the dismantling of oppressive structures. Only by confronting the bigger system, with all its complexities and contradictions, can we hope to write a new chapter for humanity, one that leads us away from the brink of catastrophe and towards a future of collective flourishing.

Contrary to mainstream perceptions of degrowth as a path of sacrifice and scarcity, the movement advocates for a vision of radical abundance. This vision proposes an economy that minimises harm and unnecessary consumption while maximising equality, well-being, care, conviviality and environmental sustainability. It argues for a shift in the stories we construct about possibility and necessity, advocating for a future with creativity and joy that transcends the artificial limitations imposed by existing ideologies.

These narratives also include responses to deeper questions about those whose lives in the current world are worth something, and those whose lives are not worthy. We have all witnessed a climate movement too silent in the eyes of unfolding genocide in Palestine. We cannot proclaim

to fight for a liveable future if we can't condemn a genocide that is happening in front of our very eyes. A genocide that is supported by Europe and the United States.

To us, this is a symptom of the winners-versus-losers mechanism that is so deeply entrenched in our economy. Oppressors and oppressed. Billions of profits to the oppressors, thousands of deaths for the oppressed. And this will continue to happen in the next decades. Europe has built the equivalent of 12 Berlin walls around its borders, and invests in companies such as Frontex to push-back and drown people who attempt the crossing (Rigby and Crisp undated). People who are often climate refugees, living in areas that are flooded, burned down, and dried out to the extent that there is no possibility for food production to sustain basic human needs.

'Fortress Europe' is more than just physical barriers; it's a symbol of an increasing divide between sacrifice zones, and survival zones (Rigby and Crisp undated). Billions of euros are funnelled into border control, sophisticated surveillance systems, drones, and patrolling vessels. Behind these walls, the human cost of growth. The Mediterranean Sea has turned into a graveyard for thousands of migrants. People desperate to escape war, persecution, and the devastating impacts of climate change are taking life-threatening journeys, only to meet tragic ends at Europe's doorstep. Reports of pushbacks, where refugees are forcibly turned away, often violently, directly contravene international law and the principle of non-expulsion, which prohibits returning people to a place where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

Those walls are supposed to protect Europe as the 'world's greenest continent' due to the European Green Deal. Yet, while Europe is building solar panels and windmills praising itself for a green agenda, it is devastating huge areas in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Chile for cobalt and lithium, displacing indigenous communities and largely offshoring emissions and waste. The Global North is largely responsible for the climate crisis, and the Global South will largely face the consequences (Hickel 2020). This is a power dynamic reflected in our economic and political structures that needs to fundamentally change if we are serious about the climate crisis.

The way to make this vision of degrowth happen involves important policy changes that are both ambitious and necessary. These include the redistribution of wealth, the cancellation of climate debt, the implementation of a universal basic income, investments in loss and damage funds, the degrowth of high-income countries' economies, the expansion of universal public services, the reduction of working hours, fundamentally a re-evaluation of what constitutes a meaningful human life and direct democracy. Such transformative steps demand humility, a willingness to learn from the global majority, and embrace decolonial thought leadership. An intellectual humility that goes beyond learning from the 'best practices' in other countries, and goes as deep as challenging the fundamental core ideas on which our worldviews are built. As Audre Lorde (2000) famously said:

> the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

Any current leader in the West needs to prioritise learning and maybe even more unlearning – if not, their systematic ignorance will be in the way of any real change. These, then, represent not mere adjustments to the current system but a radical overhaul of our economic, social and ecological relations.

The degrowth discourse has become a resonant call to action, rallying activists, scholars and policymakers to extend the momentum beyond theoretical discussions into tangible, collective action. What we need is a 'movement of movements' (Marina Sitrin, Chapter 4, this volume).

When looking at the fundamental ideas that degrowth stands for, it might surprise how popular many of them are already. From sufficiency policies to reprioritising our economy towards the more vital jobs, support is found all over the political spectrum. Then why, one might wonder, are not more of us in the streets fighting together for economic transformation? Why are so many of us fighting each other?

We cannot talk about building a movement of movements without talking about the artificially constructed political polarisation and division that seems to shape this age. While a sense of frustration against business as usual is growing from the left to the right, the populist right-winged narrative seems to be winning the most votes. A narrative that transforms the anti-elite sentiments and feelings left behind by globalisation into scapegoating and xenophobia. This is creating a collective lack of connection, to ourselves, each other and the larger web of life, a feeling of powerlessness and, ultimately, exhaustion.

Where the politics of now use economic fear to create a fake social sense of scarcity, the politics of the future that we stand for uses economic hope to create a real sense of connectedness. It starts with deep empathy and compassion, understanding more deeply what it's like for others – wherever they are in our now global capitalism – to live inside this economy. For, even as many are marginalised, they are marginalised within it. The politics of the future moves towards solidarity between people and movements, fighting each other's fights until they become our own. And it ends with true co-liberation – liberating ourselves and each other from this oppressive system, not out of some form of altruism but because we're all in this together.

The real and most pressing question is, could the fight against growth be the thing that unites us all? That is the question that keeps coming back in every conversation we have, and that fuels our hope for a new wave of social movements, of a potential crack in the system. What if everyone who feels a vague sense of frustration with this economic system starts connecting the dots and sees its systems of power more clearly? What if connecting the dots leads to connecting the movements that want a different tomorrow, fighting next to each other against the small minority who benefits from today? What if we dare to dream beyond growth, and dare to demand change beyond business as usual?

We're not fighting for greenwashed sentences in the playbook of today anymore. We're writing new chapters in completely different books. Beyond the myth of infinite growth, beyond artificial societal divisions.

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DEGROWTH
Future research directions

Anitra Nelson and Vincent Liegey

Neoliberalism – or, perhaps better, late capitalism – has seriously impacted academic structures and experiences. Typically, the selection of academics, university programmes and research funding is dominated by 'real-world' commercial objectives – revealing seduction by technological research directions and suspicion of radical critiques of a political or economic nature, and affective or emotional research. Such mainstream directions have tended to skew the initial uptake of degrowth to economistic and would-be ecological circles – such as *Ecological Economics* and the *Journal of Cleaner Production* – distracting degrowth from its foundations and cross-connections in philosophy, scientific theory, deep ecology, Indigenous studies and radical social critiques (Jarrige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume; Latouche, Chapter 24, this volume). Yet, with its new visibility, we expect degrowth and aligned movement advocates, activists, practitioners and scholars to become more significant readerships and engaged participants in research within a degrowth field of studies that is more practical, holistic and multi-dimensional in themes and methods in future (Lazanyi et al. Chapter 23, this volume).

Here, following the degrowth movement-oriented content of this handbook, we argue that important future research directions will closely refer to, and even in certain ways be directly determined by, the degrowth movement's agenda. Consequently, we have chosen to discuss future research in terms of this broad movement-oriented angle wherein the activist scholar is most at home. As such this chapter speaks especially to engaged researchers who are concerned with agency, who are self-reflective, curious, critical, open and generate research directions in the form of identified challenges, analytical assessments and critical questions.

Each chapter in this book indicates future research directions in terms of their degrowth themes and topics. We do not iterate their conclusions in this final chapter. Rather, we integrate and refer to them in terms of their relevance to various points and questions raised. First, key aspects of the degrowth movement are presented; second, apposite research methods are identified; third, relationality, ecological–cultural perspectives, and action-oriented prefigurative politics are singled out as fields demanding greater attention; fourth, we review the implications of the increasingly hostile political and economic world in which the movement must create and select appropriate strategic directions. We conclude that practical research is central to degrowth's future.

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Degrowth as a movement

Conscious and conscientious intra-movement and inter-movement research is a primary agenda item, especially given the holism of degrowth; its multi-scaler dimensions; the extreme urgency of immediately responding appropriately to entwined ecological and socio-economic challenges – seemingly contradicting a slow and careful approach; and the extraordinary synergies with a range of like-movements, many of which are allies and gain the same or similar supporters.

The degrowth movement is glocal. Activists, practitioners and advocates are involved in community and neighbourly activities designed to embed degrowth practices in their everyday life. Yet the same actors often engage much more broadly in local, regional, national and international spheres, including communicating with degrowth peers face-to-face and online. Similarly, they engage with all types of relevant grassroots and influential political, economic and environmental players.

The International Degrowth Network (IDN) Assembly held adjacent to the 9th International Degrowth Conference, in Zagreb (Croatia) in the European autumn of 2023, determined to establish a formal sociocratic organisation for the IDN. This move sought to embrace, rather than depart from, its horizontalist tendencies within a highly visible formal structure, aiming to make processes of promotion and expansion more orderly and efficient. At the start of 2024 the IDN database listed well over 300 degrowth groups across the world, thousands of degrowth publications and dozens of degrowth educational courses (IDN 2025), all of which only represent the most formal, visible and engaged degrowth activism and resources.

There is an incalculable amount of underground degrowth activity, some hidden to avoid repression, others simply more interested in practising on the ground rather than promoting themselves more broadly. Beyond this explicitly degrowth activity, Slavomíra Ferenčuhová et al. (Chapter 9, this volume) and Tsagkari et al. (Chapter 10, this volume) highlight incidental, unintended and unconscious, 'accidental' and 'real-existing' degrowth activities. Moreover, degrowth activism happens within distinctive yet aligned organisations, such as the 'slow movement' (Plomteux, Chapter 17, this volume) and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives network of networks (GTA 2024). Degrowth principles of modest, convivial living with respect for nature have always accompanied homo sapiens and their cultures and civilisations even if much of that experience appears lost (Sahlins 1972).

Not surprisingly, then, the degrowth movement spawns diversity, especially given its ecological and convivial principles (Vetter and Festerer, Chapter 15, this volume), which demand locally appropriate practices with unique characteristics. Reflecting this, degrowth has grown in multi-facetted ways across regions and within and between language groups – as shown in Part II by nine chapters such as one on Italy by Krähmer et al (Chapter 6), Germany by Schmelzer and Muraca (Chapter 7) and Catalunya by Algueró and D'Alisa (Chapter 8). One would expect this aspect of degrowth to deepen and attract more research commentary and analysis over the next decade.

Characterising degrowth as diverse, specifically in a cultural sense, is not to suggest that the movement is representative or succeeds at inclusion across various demographic profiles. Critical interest groups represent particular heterogeneous approaches, such as the Feminism(s) and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA) (Paulson et al., Chapter 29, this volume) – for men, see Bob Pease (Chapter 30, this volume) – and Global South perspectives (Sitrin, Barkin and Ngam in Chapters 4, 12, and 13 respectively in this volume), as well as Global East ones (Pungas and Gebauer, Chapter 20, this volume). Advocating for the interests of the disadvantaged poor, see Parrique, De Schutter, and Brand and Wissen (Chapters 3, 26 and 27, respectively, this volume). Such diversity

enables the movement to engage in constructive self-criticism, broaden its horizons, and benefit from rich insights and novel ways of thinking about their directions.

As a socio-political movement of the 21st century, with contestable structures and functions, degrowth begs further examination in terms of touchstone concepts and values – some of which are analysed in all the contributions to Part III on 'degrowth concepts in action', such as Chapter 15 on autonomy and freedom by Clive L. Spash. Researching specific degrowth values, principles and philosophical approaches in everyday practice demonstrates the unique character of degrowth as an organically developed assembly of practices designed as levers of transformation. Such analyses unearth uncomfortable challenges, as in the area of health – mobilising caring-for in terms of prevention as well as treatments (Hensher and Aillon, Chapter 19, this volume).

Especially in the 2020s, as degrowth has gained greater traction, there are distracting calls from many academic institutions drawing attention to their employee stars and particularly from mainstream media highlighting certain degrowth advocates as if they were representative, 'the best' or even 'leaders' of degrowth. These growth-economy style tendencies have raised serious concerns within an avowedly 'flat' movement breaking from competitive, hierarchical and individualistic characteristics of the mainstream (Fitzpatrick, Chapter 11, this volume). As such, tensions between academic and practitioner perspectives reflect this uncomfortable milieux (Lazanyi et al., Chapter 23, this volume).

Instead, valuing breadth, the movement encourages listening to and engaging with a range of diverse voices of members and would-be supporters, seeking activist and practitioner testimonies, and constructive and acute observer critiques (as called for by Barkin and Ngam, in Chapters 12 and 13, respectively, this volume). Thus, the movement is likely to strongly benefit from drawing on and contributing to research for sharing information for dynamic action-oriented use. This is the case, not only in terms of making findings, analyses and advice open access but also through creative and popular communication of research, say through zines, pop-up theatre, talks and posts. Institutional and independent scholars can collaborate with practitioners and activists to engage in communities of practice where emergent questions, challenges, reflections and methods can be shared. Such developments can contribute to and benefit from active and engaged pedagogical agency (Luis I. Prádanos, Chapter 21, this volume).

Social movement theorists have a particular responsibility to critically review and interrogate degrowth, but most disciplines – and multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary researchers in particular – can contribute to realising a unique space for degrowth as it becomes a more genuinely understood field of studies. The movements' assumptions, directions, drivers, aims, visions of alternative futures and actual performance and influence are all open for much greater interrogation and debate.

Strategic directions

Any discussion of strategic directions for degrowth research requires an analysis of the degrowth movement in terms of tensions, challenges, and fractures as well as dynamic collaborations, especially between grassroots and top-down approaches. Distinctive and overlapping grassroots and top-down approaches influence somewhat conflictual preferences for enacting social and ecological transformation. This generates debates on more (and less) successful ways of exercising politics; on the most constructive ways activists, advocates, practitioners and scholars might spend their time – either collaborating with or delegating tasks between themselves; on identifying specific actions either for grassroots attention or for top-down pressure; and on aligning and activating

both grassroots and top-down forms of agency simultaneously for cohesion, influence, impact and stronger achievements with respect to certain campaigning.

Grassroots and top-down: 2018 and 2023 European Parliament forums

Tensions between grassroots and top-down approaches are visible. In September 2018 and May 2023 the European Parliament hosted two- and three-day conferences on Post-Growth and Beyond Growth, respectively. Both inside and outside such forums, activists question the capacity, not just the will, of such entrenched authorities to usefully engage and act. The most apprehensive degrowthers tend to sidestep communication with governmental agents and agencies altogether or limit their engagement to progressive local government councils, as in municipalism. Most degrowth advocates participating in the forums were challenged by a certain politics of limitation as in the 'us' of degrowth activists being called into 'their' space to act within expected European Union (EU) processes and protocol.

Significantly, both EU conferences were named in ways that avoided using the term 'degrowth' while most of the organisers, participants and attending activists and researchers explicitly identify as *degrowth* advocates or scholars. All terms have a tendency to be fluid but Widuto et al. (2023, p. 5) present reasonable distinctions in their EU Parliamentary Research Service brief for the Beyond Growth conference, writing that advocates of green and inclusive growth take a *modified growth* perspective; post-growth, too, 'does not necessarily mean abandoning growth as a policy objective'; and 'beyond growth' is defined in terms of 'a paradigm shift towards a multidimensional *model of development*, with a variety of policy solutions in fields such as taxation, social policy and environmental protection'. Most significantly, Widuto et al. (2023, p. 5) are unequivocal that *degrowth* explicitly challenges the entire concept of growth and its aligned 'development' models.

Despite tensions and qualifications around the EU conferences – which illustrate the challenges of activists engaging with those limited by protocol inherent to hierarchical mainstream structures – both proved occasions for some direct discussions, and actions. At the end of the Post-Growth conference, 238 academics made a call for the EU and its member states to explicitly demote gross domestic product (GDP) indicators and instead prioritise criteria related to human and ecological well-being in future plans (Letters 2018). By the 2023 conference, degrowth was attracting more attention from top officials with the EU already deciding to make substantial funding for a research project to an EU university on a post-growth deal (named 'REAL'). Yet grassroots activists made their mark even more emphatically.

Anuna De Wever (2023), climate justice campaigner and co-author with Lena Hartog of Chapter 34, this volume, made a passionate and forthright speech at the 2023 Beyond Growth conference declaring that 'if we move beyond growth we have to acknowledge what lies below our growth – white supremacy, colonialism and imperialism' (cheers from the audience). She called out extractivism in the majority world on which European economies depend (Pineault 2023, Chapter 2, this volume) and made a plea for EU authorities to listen and engage in *genuine dialogue*. 'We are talking about courage. European leaders, if you lack political bravery to make paradigm-shifting decisions, then leave it to us'. The speech delivered by De Wever (2023) received a standing ovation.

Degrowth economies

How to re-embed the economy is a key challenge for degrowth, which invites us to decolonise the economistic imaginaries that dominate our cultures and politics. So degrowth explores *how* to

decommodify society. Many emphasise the importance of *localised* economies, such as Hornborg (2024) who argues that local currencies facilitate the (re)localisation of economies. Generalising cooperative structures and/or small locally oriented firms (Buch-Hensen et al. 2024, pp. 91–105; Trainer 2020) are popular proposals. Yet commoning offers a tighter fit for organising degrowth provisioning in the future, as argued by both Ben Robra et al. and Vetter and Fersterer (Chapters 32 and 14, respectively, this volume). Politically conscious and simultaneously practical efforts – as in the defashioning manifesto (Sandra Niessen, Chapter 18, this volume) – offer inspiring practical forms for advancing, in this case an entire sector, in degrowth directions.

There is increasing interest in maximising participation in economic planning, such as 'democratic economic planning' (INDEP 2024), 'economic democracy' (Steinberger et al. 2024) and 'democratic ecological planning' (Durand et al. 2024). A minority interrogate deep structural implications of money and markets (Dengler and Plank 2024) to argue for commoning and direct democracy (Liegey and Nelson 2020, pp. 158–69). Initially, the French degrowth movement proposed an articulated degrowth project around an unconditional autonomy allowance, questioning the institution of property in moving towards commoning and deliberative democracy (Jarige and Liegey, Chapter 5, this volume; Liegey and Nelson 2020). Questions around public and private, contested and hidden, economic, ecological and ethical debts are central (Ngam, Chapter 13, this volume). Some even argue that sufficiency within Earth's limits and equity, diversity, and inclusion cannot be achieved within any form of market-based production and distribution (Nelson 2024a).

Clearly stated economic forms and directions as well as institutions are necessary for mobilising and guiding transformations based on degrowth's shared principles and visions. As such, grounded theory researchers and activist scholars have a potentially massive contribution to play by interrogating, strategically analysing, and rationalising lines of thought and models of provisioning. Strategic research questions seem infinite in a climate where the gravity of urgent solutions span diverse landscapes and cultures, all in various and uneven stages of deterioration and disintegration from both past and active capitalist exploitation (as the variety of chapters in Part II of this volume illustrate).

Researchers are propelled by questions. *What* is wrong? *Where* do we want to go? And, *why*? And, especially, *how* will we get there? The monkey on the back of all researchers is the niggling question – are we addressing the most appropriate questions? If not, why are such critical questions being avoided? Is it because it is harder to find funding solutions to such questions, say, because they are regarded as 'political' ('radical')? Or, aren't we brave enough? Or, perhaps, the barriers are more associated with creatively designing appropriate research methods?

Research methods

Given questions and solving problems spur researchers, they do best to follow the advice that Anuna De Wever (2023) offered to EU experts – be humble and listen. This is appropriate advice to all types of researchers, from sceptical critics through to those whose positions are critically supportive. Degrowth research and associated discourses generally require 'with' approaches, even as researchers simultaneously reserve the right to make independent, even damning, points.

To put this position into perspective, degrowth research has been much maligned especially by those who interpret and assess the field using incongruous quasi-scientific approaches. Savin and van den Bergh (2024), for example, pillory degrowth works in a simplistic and narrow survey that discounts many degrowth publications, including books, and judges the field on the extent to which it uses modelling, empirical data, objective policy advice, collaboration and feasibility (Parrique 2024). These are clearly inappropriate criteria for evaluating a field and movement that

is essentially speculative, future-oriented and anti-systemic in its approaches, analyses and discourses, and whose practices are inevitably emergent, prefigurative and experimental.

Degrowth theory and practice is not – and should not try to be – a quasi-objective science or economistic, seeking to prove its logic and credentials via testable hypotheses. The latter approaches tend to simplify and contort degrowth's essential character as a philosophy with a deeply *relational* perspective. This is not to suggest that certain topics don't deserve scientific approaches and analyses, and definitely ought to get such attention (for instance, in practical assessments for the degrowth doughnut made by Mladen Domazet, Chapter 16, this volume). Rather the call being made here is to appreciate the general context, significance and use of research for degrowth. Think post-development, pluriversity, creative methods, social analyses and futures studies.

Many researchers, particularly activist scholars, are on firmest ground when they adopt, draw on, or adapt from, research methods appropriate to their positions and intents. 'Activist research' methods (Martínez 2024) include creative practice-oriented research methods and ethics (Kara 2015, pp. 19–54); decolonising methods (Smith 2021), including more-than-human relational perspectives (Escobar et al. 2024); mixed methods (customised qualitative and quantitative research), including ethnography and auto-ethnography; action research, such as participatory action research (Cornish et al. 2023); militant research, 'militant acts' to use the language of Hoffman (2019); inductive and iterative 'grounded research' derived from collecting and analysing data in disciplined and highly conscious ways (Charmaz 2017); emancipatory research (Nehez 2022); transformative research methods (Wuppertal Institute 2024); speculative, process-oriented and relational 'research-creation' (Springgay et al. 2020); and well-established critical and self-critical research theories and methods.

Moreover, right across the board those engaged in *quantitative* data collection and analyses need to interrogate the extent to which they rely on established, generic and oft lightly questioned conceptual approaches and perspectives. Simply collecting data, coding, categorising and contextualising data are relatively simple tasks. The real difficulty lies in astute qualitative analyses and creatively assessing the implications, ramifications and significance of such analyses in real political, social, ecological, cultural and economic contexts honing in on real-life action. Most degrowth researchers locate their research in transformative research contexts and, consequently, are best advised to adopt interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, and to remain focused on robust real-world theories and research methods.

Policy briefs and advice

Alongside strategic research of a generic nature is the work of advising policymakers and recommending policies that might prove to be transformative. Certain contributions to this handbook offer perspectives for policymaking, for example Olivier De Schutter in Chapter 26, and Federico Savini in Chapter 31, of this volume. Aligned developments include databases appropriate to active and participatory research practices. The rise of research portals such as the Degrowth Database (IDN 2025) and Postgrowth Cities Coalition (PCC undated) offer resources for policymakers as well as self-organising research, practitioners and discursive forums. General engagement, and particular research, between practitioners and scholars is wanting, as pointed out by Lazanyi et al. (Chapter 23, this volume). Reviews of degrowth policy research suggest many gaps and opportunities for in-depth analyses, pilot projects and engagement (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022).

As an example of generic policy directions, Schneider and Nelson (2018) have discussed 'enabling policies' contra current disabling housing and planning policies oriented around commercially produced housing sold as a commodity and asset. *Enabling policies* refer to greater

encouragement and support for degrowth and degrowth-aligned practitioners, including owner-builders of eco-collaborative housing, such as small and sustainable 'tiny houses' clustered as ecovillages (Nelson 2018); for renovating buildings for both multiple-resident households and multi-household sharing and commoning; for relaxing building plan specifications to account for second-hand materials found post-planning stage; for allowing squatting specifically where residents practice degrowth; and to self-organising housing cooperatives, including financial models such as the Mietshäuser Syndikat (Germany) and Radical Routes (United Kingdom). Degrowth collections on planning (Savini et al. 2022) as well as on housing (Nelson and Schneider 2018) and food (Nelson and Edwards 2021) include examples and autoethnographies of existing experimentation, all of which suggest the various ways in which contemporary planning, building and allied regulations constrain and prohibit degrowth initiatives of a prefigurative nature. They also indicate the needs for creative and experimental research methods with multiple actors and agents.

But, beyond the ways that researchers work, distinct degrowth research *topics* call out for more attention. So the next sections deal with the ecological–cultural dimension and current political challenges underscored by the urgency and enormity of transformation, before addressing postures required by a hostile militarised and rightist political climate.

The ecological, relational and more-than-human

We suggest that the ecological, the relational and the integration of the more-than-human into our everyday activities – emphasising caring and commoning approaches to provisioning of all kinds – is a key area for attention. Beyond ecological economics – indeed challenging that field's established themes and methods and its implicit economistic failings – would seem to involve a lot more consideration of the ecological within autonomy, justice and material relations. Central to commoning is co-governance and horizontal relations and processes for decision-making and organising activities. But the caring perspective on the ecological and human as sameness and oneness is a key dimension calling for interrogation.

Wildlife populations are falling dramatically due to land-use changes, such as settlement, agriculture, and mining expanding into and disrupting (clearing, destroying and fragmenting) rich ecosystems often in the majority world and mainly in order to supply minority world overconsumption (Greenfield 2024). This is set to increase massively with the so-called green technological transition. As degraded habitats are now deleteriously experiencing climate changes, governmental conservation and other responses continue to be too little too late. Encouraging and supporting defences of territories and resistance to exploitative social and ecological practices and active regeneration in all landscapes are key.

Citizen science experiments can be welded to politically autonomous projects. Degrowth researchers can draw on and experiment with, for instance, unique mixes of approaches and methods used within political ecology, radical environmental justice, and ecologically directed political economy, as well as anarchy and autonomist Marxism. Participatory action research methods can support various transformative activists to more effectively resist, regenerate and innovatively integrate the more-than-human into everyday human lives – surpassing insufficient state action. And where such methods fail us, there is a creative challenge for us to design better and more appropriate research methods.

How can urban degrowth activists and practitioners integrate holistic appreciations and deeply ecologically sensitive responses to exploitation elsewhere that their concentrated and ultra human–human living relies on? Just as Savini (Chapter 31, this volume) questions the urban form, we ask whether dense human settlements are ideal or, whether they simply facilitate the imperialist

mode challenged by Brand and Wissen (Chapter 27, this volume). If so, what might be more appropriate in terms of settlement patterns to transform away from urban–rural divides? Would more multivarious styles of working in more collectively sufficient community-oriented *and* nomadic ensembles enable more-than-human attachments and greater acceptance of all human and more-than-human being? David Barkin (Chapter 12, this volume) points in the direction of highly relevant cosmovisions.

Politics: scale and time

Marina Sitrin (Chapter 4, this volume) celebrates the movement of movements in which 'autonomy' is being established as political processes of direct decision-making, action and co-governance. Caring, sharing and commoning are at the heart of relationally rich 'more-than-human' beingness that, arguably, is central to revolutionising our all-too-human politics. The micro-politics of personal interactions, and the activities and the macro-politics of a collapsing hierarchy and an emergent horizontalism deserve increasing attention.

Similarly, the *politics of economics* must become more central to degrowth activism and research – 'economics' read here as multiple ways of provisioning ourselves, and the 'political' as relational dynamics embodying the ecological and the more-than-human. It is relatively easy to point to criteria demonstrating economic and ecological inequity, and to call for redressing social and ecological inequities. Yet successful ways of addressing inequities are illusive and would seem to demand strident societal analyses integrating ecological and political matters. Taking account of *intersectional* analyses inequities multiply but also options can become more subtle, tailored and grounded. As localised change becomes more appropriate, it becomes more convincing and attractive to widen support and effort. In terms of a broader approach that might characterise future policies, and policymaking research, is a loosening of state and market controls in favour of substantive democratic autonomy and subsidiarity; commoning through collective deliberation as a protected right; and other forms of community-based direct democracy practices across all production, basic infrastructure, and ecological regeneration.

The planetary scale and short time-frame we have for action leads to responses with contradictory rationales. Bird's eye political economy approaches of certain scholars point to democratic planning of degrowth economies as the seemingly necessary form of transitioning (Durand et al. 2024). This stream is somewhat sceptical of grassroots, local and community-oriented models of provisioning with autonomous decision making on the basis of subsidiarity and direct control. Conversely, their gaze can be criticised as overly economic and technical. Their models seem shallow in terms of democratic and political content. In particular, there is a real need to engage in rigorous research to unpack and bridge these types of discourses, and to enhance the grassroots politics of resistance to capitalist economic relations of accumulation and growth in forms that can, even must, embody a politics of political autonomy and collectively organised provisioning.

Most would argue – especially given the urgency and scale of our socio-ecological challenges – that the means of transformation, how we get there, needs to be an end in and of itself. From this perspective, it seems that steady state economy models imply a bureaucratised degrowth (an oxymoron) failing to embrace holistic and broad spread liberation that promises to achieve much more, across multiple landscapes and cultures in a quicker time. The latter grassroots option is considered more 'utopian', more improbable. Yet action in this direction exists, even in the mainstream. Failings of the creative democratic intervention of the French Citizens' Convention on the Climate (KNOCA undated) showed up the poverty of capitalist politics and the sound

sensibilities of citizens. Degrowth researchers, advocates, activists and practitioners need to collectively discuss, research and rationalise such core issues in lively and comprehensive ways as transformative acts in and of themselves. The movement is well-suited to research for, with and by all its members wherever they live or position themselves. And there is always a need for independent critiques and fresh analyses from novel angles.

On the ground there are numerous actions worthy of the researcher's gaze. Observed, witnessed, embodied and experiential acts might fail to get us where we want to end up but they still contribute to getting there. Marisa Holmes (2023) concludes in her lesson-oriented analysis of Occupy movement 'failures' that 'this is just practice'. Degrowth acts are also rehearsals, in which we learn more, our bodies and minds priming themselves. We learn new balancing skills from stumbling and falling. We get up and go on, our minds and bodies stronger – the individualisms in all our being potentially slowly transforming to the collectivity we are becoming.

Hostile international political environments

The EU, like many governmental and intergovernmental bodies, is an actor within a wider ranging complex of institutions all supporting market-based economies and under the influence of lobbies. Each state provides the legitimacy for markets to exist, and for private property, trade and investment to prevail, under a veneer of representing the views and wants of citizens who are, meanwhile, disciplined to work for the market, to live by the market, and to evolve a consumer culture with that market. Such market-oriented polities act like skins holding, upholding and protecting those same market-based organs that structure, limit and sustain states. Structuralist and materialist analyses appreciate that, together, the market and state prevent transformation brutally, even violently if they perceive it necessary. This is an asymmetrical struggle with an unfair power balance between, on the one hand, rising plutocracies characterised by a concentration of wealth in a small minority of people and transnational companies and, on the other hand, emerging majorities who might well support degrowth principles and endorse the movement's call for direct democracy, social justice and ecological respect and regeneration.

As rationales and visions for degrowth become more and more attractive, degrowth and like-movements must enact structural change in a range of areas, including work (Houtbeckers, Chapter 22, this volume). The hostile capitalist growth environment for degrowth activism is a continuity of the violent repression against anti-industrialist, slavery and colonial movements, and other such alternatives in the last few centuries. This includes harsh military-industrial states focused on defensive and aggressive military acts, with high social and ecological costs, mainly targeting ecologically oriented activists and critical voices who are increasingly being classified, criminalised, as 'terrorists'. As such we are experiencing nothing less than 'a full-blown war between two competing ways of life' (Ross 2024, p. 131).

Power is concentrated in appropriated media, social network platforms, publishing companies, research institutions and cultures that avoid dealing with key questions in favour of promoting the rise of highly questionable and unstable political leadership. The ascent of the right as a relatively popular politico-cultural force and brutal movement exemplifies an especially illiberal last stage of capitalism. Simultaneously, digital surveillance, generative AI and the sophisticated automations of late capitalism – along with the techno-optimism of vocal sectors of the left – feed into ecologically and practically ungrounded visions, say of nuclear energy futures or of automated 'postcapitalist' abundance. Massive threats in the form of climate change, biodiversity loss and other ecological disasters haemorrhage material challenges to our existence right, left and centre. In short, as conflicts mount, we face the ever-present threats of war.

The increasing universality of such hostile characteristics do not simply paralyse potential resistance but, fortunately, contributes to the growth of common analyses; to stronger needs and possibilities for alliances; and to a clear rationale and momentum for broad spread, interconnected, and consistent transformation (Alexandra Köves, Chapter 25, this volume). Currently, horizontal processes epitomise societal potential. But the forces we face as activists, as practitioners, as advocates and scholars of degrowth are undeniable, indeed central, to the degrowth research agenda (2025–). Authors in Part IV of this handbook address some of these challenges. Paul Stubbs (Chapter 28, this volume) reminds us of the lapsed potential of a collective force of non-aligned states, the non-aligned movement. Ecofeminist perspectives (FaDA) challenge intimate and broad spread patriarchal violence while integrating the ecological.

On many fronts, the context within which change has started and intends to flourish appears increasingly and very disturbingly hostile. The leitmotif of 'degrowth or barbarism' has reared its ugly head decades after Paul Ariès (2004) first used the term. Since then six out of nine planetary boundaries have been exceeded. Climate change impacts are experienced and observed, for instance as increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and more common and extreme 'natural' disasters. Technologies intrude into our intimate lives and question our sociality and humanity. We are in an age of post-truth narratives and illiberalism supported by plutocrats and oligarchs. The wealthiest high-tech entrepreneurs flourish as they impose dangerous and fanciful green growth initiatives which will inevitably be accompanied by rising inequities and the further erosion of democracy. Military activities and budgets rise exponentially. What had been relegated to the past in certain states – genocide, crimes of war, crimes against humanity, and immanent risk of nuclear apocalypse – seem to have returned everywhere to haunt us. On the cusp of the peak of population, demographic imbalances attending collapsing fertility rates threaten generational solidarity. The consumption of debilitating drugs, such as opioids, and the collapse of our health and educational systems reinforce a global atmosphere of anxiety. The thermo-industrial civilisation associated with capitalism and productivism, neo-colonialism and tech-scientism is collapsing and expressing its self-destructive power.

Consequently, while degrowth has risen from the grass roots, and offers an increasingly comprehensive and substantial platform, there is no denying that asymmetrical power imbalances and dynamics make it less visible, and viable. It is easy to feel paralysed, apathetic and to decide that it is simply impossible to liberate ourselves from the growth paradigm. Even if worldwide majorities were to support a democratic and just transformation (which certainly sounds more and more reasonable, attractive and rational) and even though most technical and organisational solutions exist to transform ourselves to live according to degrowth principles – degrowth only seems 'real' in small, local and vulnerable emergent experiments (Nelson 2024b). Consequently it is critical for degrowth and aligned, even if distinct, movements – such as ecosocialism (Dale, Chapter 33, this volume) – to develop and expand strategic forms of resistance and defence, and to pro-actively advance their prefigurative political forms and practices.

By way of a conclusion, degrowth research should explore how to disrupt this status quo more decisively and permanently, to construct democratic renewal in forms that make power balances more favourable to degrowth, and to achieve the worldwide reparations necessary for a just and inclusive transformation. External dynamics demand that the whole movement prepare for even more violent collapses of our so-called civilisation. So, what are the soundest geopolitical principles and directions for degrowth? How can wealth be redistributed in non-violent ways? How can sound horizontalist political practices – including comprehensive deliberation over our basic needs and how to fulfil them for everyone in a sustainable and convivial way – be established in permanent and expanding ways? Degrowth advocates such holistic politico-economic and ecological security, just reparations and inclusion.

It is important to remember that, in the midst of transformation, every (re)searcher is an activist just as every activist is a (re)searcher. All of our searching is at the very core of degrowth's future.

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